鎌池和馬
イラスト／はいむらきよたか
新約
とある魔術の禁書目録
インデックス
17
電撃文庫

Toaru Majutsu no Index: New Testament — Volume 17

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「何言っているの。幽霊だってお供え物くらいは頂戴するわ」
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『上里勢力』の一人。直接戦闘を担当する武闘派の『海賊少女』
琉華（ルカ）

Designed by Hirokazu Watanabe(2725 Inc.)

「そういやこれ、御坂の能力で直接操る事はできないのか？」
右手に異能ならなんでも打ち消す「幻想殺し（イマジンブレイカー）」を右腕に宿す。上里翔流救出のために、全ての敵にまわした少年
上条当麻（かみじょうとうま）
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学園都市に七人しかいない「超能力者（レベル５）」の一人で、「超電磁砲（レールガン）」の異名を持つ少女
御坂美琴（みさかみこと）
「そろそろ本格戦闘開始といこうじゃないの」
「ゼーマン効果を利用した光分散式計算プロセッサなのです」
「上里勢力」の一人……だったが、単独で上条の味方についた自称ＵＦＯ少女
府蘭（フラン）

「はあー、はあー、かはあ!?」
「上里勢力」の一人、最強の戦闘力を誇る「絶滅犯にして上里の義理の妹
去鳴（ザザメ）
「……ああ。先生を痛めつけた者全てに対する復讐という話だと、上里翔流だけでは食べ足りないって事かもしれませんねぇ」
尊敬する「先生」の敵討ちのため、学園都市を混沌に陥れた張本人
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「それにしても……何だか感慨深いな。ここが「新たな天地」か。……ん？　あれは……」
上条当麻の「幻想殺し（イマジンブレイカー）」と対をなす「理想送り（ワールドリジェクター）」を右手に宿す「平凡な少年」
上里翔流（かみさとしょうる）

Prologue: Or the Assumptions Include the Conclusion – to_the_Girl's_ABYSS.

There was a boy named Kamisato Kakeru.

Or perhaps it would be best to say there "had been" one.

He had been the kind of normal high school boy one could find anywhere.

Or at least he had never missed a chance to say so.

At one point, he had belatedly realized he had been given a power that did not suit him at all. But sadly his sensibilities remained those of "a normal high school boy", so he lacked the flexibility needed to adapt to this sudden opportunity. This psychological phenomenon was not all that unusual. For example, he could not have been the only one that, when looking at the lottery tickets for sale, would think, "winning first prize would be great, but if I really did win it, it would tear my current life apart."

In a way, Kamisato Kakeru had won a lottery he did not remember entering.

He thought this unasked-for fortune had torn his life apart.

Even the things he had already possessed seemed to change in his view. Just like an unexpected financial windfall would cast a dark light on anyone approaching with a smile on their face.

What had that boy felt after all color seemed to fade from his world?

He had felt intense anger toward the lottery runners who had selfishly selected him and he had concluded that eliminating them from the world would negate that selection.

Revenge.

It was simple enough to say, but that boy had actually acted on it. He and the more than 100 girls following him had found the beings known as Magic Gods, cornered them, and hunted them down. And he had used the very right hand that those Magic Gods had given him.

For better or for worse, that should have tied up all the loose ends in Kamisato Kakeru's story. But he had chosen a poor location for his revenge: Academy City.

A single scientist greatly changed the history of the world.

Her name was Kihara Yuiitsu.

She had grown cruelly involved when Kamisato Kakeru had killed the golden retriever that Academy City had sent as an assassin.

She had bluntly accepted the power of the boy who had destroyed the being she looked up to as a teacher, and then she had calmly sharpened her fangs as she waited for the chance to take his head.

The result had been a draw due to injury.

But Kihara Yuiitsu had severed the very right hand that made Kamisato Kakeru special and transplanted it onto her own wrist.

Act Two had begun in an Academy City with a temperature of 55 degrees Celsius.

Kihara Yuiitsu had created "something like a soul" from the four classic elements and placed them in a flesh container known as a reduced life form. By sending out these artificial life forms known as Elements, she had worked to force Kamisato Kakeru out of hiding even if it meant turning her own home of Academy City into a sea of blood.

Kamisato had learned of the Elements' weakness to high temperatures and filled Academy City with microwaves emitted from satellite orbit to restrict the Elements' movements while he searched for Kihara Yuiitsu.

This battle also ended in a draw due to injury.

Kihara Yuiitsu had been defeated, but to prevent the suicidal ignition of some

rocket engines, Kamisato Kakeru had attached World Rejecter to his wrist once more for a final attack that would annihilate himself.

With that, the boy had been erased from the visible world.

And Kihara Yuiitsu had once more taken his right hand.

She spoke to the girls who had been left behind:

Kamisato Kakeru has been destroyed, but he is not dead. If the gate known as World Rejecter is used, there might be a one-in-a-million or one-in-a-billion chance of rescuing him. Are you sure you want to bring that down to zero?

That bound them.

She had easily completed the curse that Kamisato Kakeru had most feared: the owner of the right hand became the ruler of the girls.

To test the strength of this curse, Kihara Yuiitsu had given her first command:

Kill Kamijou Touma. I will use that to measure the loyalty of my new tools.

Kamijou Touma ran with all his might through a gray city that showed no signs of recovering from its collapse.

He was accompanied by the one girl who had not been bound by the curse: Fran.

"To hell with all of that."

Alongside this ally who could turn on him at any time, the spiky-haired boy gave a roar of defiance against the unreasonable world.

"I'm done not acting like myself!! I'll show this world just who Kamijou Touma is!!!!!!"

This is the story of the 48 hours until Academy City recovers from its great disaster.

This is the story of a boy attempting to save Kamisato Kakeru despite being told how impossible that is.

And that boy woke up in a gray and chilly city.

(It's…cold?)

It was an unreasonable chill that both stabbed at his skin and caused his organs to shiver from the inside. But once he thought about it rationally, he realized this was how things should be. It was December 9, so it was midwinter. It went without saying what would happen to someone lying on the freezing asphalt in nothing but a swimsuit.

He sat up.

His fuzzy mind started working again.

He reached his right hand toward the side of his neck to crack the bone, but belatedly realized it was not working right.

His hand was missing. His wrist simply had a rag wrapped around it.

(Oh, that's right. Since we settled things with Yuiitsu, the Elements will have stopped and Fran could end the microwave heat wave meant to stop them.)

It felt strange.

He could never speak with or contact them again, but the effects of their actions could still reach him here.

(But…this is kind of moving. So this is the abyss.)

This was not heaven or hell and it was not a strange world of swords and magic where his soul had been reincarnated. It was based on Academy City, but there was no one here. If the single line of time was seen as split into frames like a film, then normal people only perceived about 10 frames per second. If the actual amount of information was seen as 30 frames per second, then there were excess frames that acted like gaps.

From that perspective, World Rejecter, which had been a certain boy's right hand, would shift people and objects into those excess frames. That meant those people and objects could never interact with anyone despite being in the same world. If some subliminal footage was slipped in between the frames of a movie, the characters in the movie could not perceive the subliminal soda bottle.

The boy could not even guess what would happen to him now. He could not interact with anyone but himself in this world. He would truly have to be self-sufficient here. Even if he could find food for today, his future looked bleak. He

might be just fine, but he might collapse from hunger, thirst, or the cold before the first day was out. And even if he was physically fulfilled, he might break mentally. His only option was to try out whatever he could. There were no more rails laid out by anyone.

"What a pain. …Hm?"

He suddenly looked down at his right hand and something occurred to him. The hand itself was gone. He had been blown away by World Rejecter, so it made sense that the target had been set as "everything but the hand". If World Rejecter had come with him, it would only have continued blowing him away forever.

But that was not what caught his attention. It was the lack of bleeding. It was not quite a bandage, but an old rag had been lazily wrapped around his wrist and it had absorbed too much blood to tell what color it had originally been.

Unless he had woken up once before, stopped the bleeding, and collapsed again, there had to be someone else here.

"Oh, I get it…"

When he stood up and looked around, he saw things other than himself lying around: Scraps of metal that had likely been weapons, the remains of some truly gigantic rocket boosters, a ton of dirt, and a dried mark on a wall that had originally been bubbles. Those were likely things he had blown away with his right hand, although he was having trouble remembering them all now.

And there was no reason only the objects would have come here.

It would have been odd if some other people had not already been here.

(But in that case…)

That was when he heard a footstep.

He turned around and saw a girl there. Her black hair was cut at shoulder length, she had skin too sickly to even call pale, and she wore a short China dress.

The boy had looked around a moment before and there had been no one around then, but this girl had arrived right in front of him in the intersection of two large roads with nowhere to hide.

The newcomer spoke her name.

"Niang…Niang?"

"You got that right."

Even now, her tone was light and jocular.

And she was not alone. He suddenly sensed presences all around him and gazes stabbing into him. He did not turn around this time. A great pressure was keeping him from moving.

Who had been the most remarkable people he had erased?

All of them were gathered "here".

Like a forest rustling in the wind or a swarm of bugs crawling along the ground, Kamisato sensed something bizarre near his ears. This was something other than a so-called sixth sense. It may have been like the tinnitus or sharp headache some people felt when entering a haunted location. Or it was like the building rooftops, shadows below cars, and gaps between walls and vending machines. Once you started thinking about those places, it started to feel like someone was watching you from there.

Furthermore, the boy no longer had his special right hand or the 100 girls around him.

"Well, we have some choice words for you after we gave you a gift and you slaughtered us with it…"

Niang-Niang smiled cruelly toward that exposed soul.

He would have died of blood loss if they had left him alone, but they had gone out of their way to stop the bleeding and keep him alive. And the reason why could not have been more obvious.

"But let's leave it at this: it's time you had your ass kicked by every last Magic God."

Or perhaps this was Limbo, where the souls of suicide victims wandered.

All sorts of redness arrived from 360 degrees to assault Kamisato Kakeru who had nothing now.

Chapter 1: Or Cutting Off Leads to Diffusion – Gray_City.

Part 1

It was December 9 just before 5 AM.

It was impossible to know for sure with none of the clocks running, but that was probably close. The sun was finally rising and the midwinter weather turned one's breath white. The heat wave was entirely gone and it had dropped below freezing. Kamijou Touma had been wearing a swimsuit to deal with the 55 degree heat, so he felt like his lifespan was being physically shaved away. However, he could not worry about that now. Just like someone would not be particularly bothered by being in a refrigerated warehouse when their back had been sliced open by a chainsaw.

Simply put, a much greater danger was approaching from directly behind him.

It was the 100 strange and bizarre girls of the old Kamisato Faction.

Kamisato Kakeru had wielded World Rejecter to save them all despite knowing it would destroy him. And he had asked Kamijou to "take care of those girls". Their hearts had been bound by Kihara Yuiitsu stealing his right hand, so the owner of the hand ruled the girls, just as Kamisato had most feared.

Kamijou could not allow this to stand.

He could not let this happen to the boy who had saved his life.

So he would free those girls. He had to prove they could rescue Kamisato Kakeru without relying on Kihara Yuiitsu's World Rejecter. He had no idea if that was even possible, but he had to cling to that idea.

As the first step, he had to lose his pursuers so he could relax and come up with an actual plan!!

He knew that.

He knew that, but the hoodie bikini girl named Fran sounded hopeless as she fled with him.

“We can’t escape them.”

“!?”

“I’m not talking about how fast we are or how far away they are. …They have Ellen, a tracer who can use all sorts of cutting-edge forensic techniques. It can be sweat, saliva, hairs, shoeprints, or anything else. That chemical stalker can detect any trace left on the ground, so she can follow our every footprint. So she’ll definitely reach us sooner or later.”

“Then what are we supposed to do!?”

“What else?”

The hoodie, bikini, and rabbit-ear antennae girl snapped her fingers.

Immediately, something silently floated down above Kamijou’s head. It was an unidentified flying…

“Balloon?”

“We just have to avoid making any footprints. In other words, we just have to fly.”

Part 2

Ellen, who wore a swimsuit and lab coat, and Elza, a delinquent girl who looked something like a shrine maiden in her red pareo worn over a white bikini, naturally knew this was coming.

So they called for someone else.

“Maya~? How are things up there?”

Something was swimming through the sky. It was a tall and translucent girl who wore a truly ominous kimono of pure white. She was curled up in the fetal position, her chest was alluring exposed, her forehead was adorned by a triangular celestial crown with a slight notch in it, and her very long black hair

curled around her like a crescent moon. The observer in the skies faintly opened her eyes as she replied.

“Everything’s just fine. If they try to go up, my curse will snare them and bring them down.”

“There you have it.”

Ellen leaned against the railing of an overpass they had come across and lightly waved her baggy lab coat sleeves in the air overhead.

“We need to keep up the search on the ground. With Maya covering the sky, they can’t escape with Fran’s balloon. Thanks to the powerful microwaves Fran was sending out, all of the busses and trains have stopped and there are no running cars or motorcycles around here. As long as I find an obvious trail, we can catch up and take care of them.”

Ellen herself was not a fighter.

It was Elza, the eyepatch pirate girl named Luca, the cosplay girl named Olivia, and others with enough firepower to single-handedly break open a bank vault who crossed the overpass.

“You said Claire was fried by the microwaves, right?”

“…Kihara Yuiitsu. Will this kind of thing keep happening as long as we’re with her?”

“But we have no choice. We can’t give up on Kamisato-san. I don’t know what Fran and that boy are planning, but we can’t entrust Kamisato-san’s fate with them. Offering up that pointy-haired boy’s head is definitely the most certain way of keeping World Rejecter around.”

“Don’t worry. You know Claire. Before you know it, she’ll be up and fighting like nothing even happened.”

Below that overpass, Kamijou and Fran dangled from a UFO balloon as if clinging to the underside of the structure.

"…"

The UFO balloon was stopped less than 100cm away and Kamijou hung from it by a single wire. His forehead was soaked with sweat despite it being midwinter. Ellen had her hands on the railing and if she leaned dangerously forward, she would probably be able to see him. The extreme tension was too much for him to even breathe heavily.

He choked on his own breaths and his heart pounded so hard in his chest he thought it would break through his ribcage.

Fran hung from the same wire, but he still could not read any emotion in her eyes. She did not even look up. Her only movement was the occasional twitching of the rabbit-ear antennae on her head and the communications equipment stuffed inside her backpack.

She apparently adjusted the buoyancy of her handmade balloon by letting lighter-than-air gas in or out and she could freely move it in any direction, but that was no reason to relax.

Kamijou desperately held his breath, but he could not contain the internal pressure of his fear.

His lips began to move as if he were speaking a good-luck charm under his breath.

"(You have to be kidding me, you have to be kidding me.)"

"(Be quiet.)"

They could not walk on the ground, but the sky was off limits as well.

They were entirely trapped, so the last space available to them was directly below the overpass. It passed over a steel track, likely used by the subway. The entrance to the subway tunnel was nearby and it looked a lot like the entrance to an underground drain.

"(That's only 20 meters, shorter than a school pool. We can make it from here.)"

"(They'll see us. They'll see us and kill us.)"

"(Maya is only doing air-to-air surveillance and Ellen's group believes they have everything on the ground covered, so they aren't thinking about this lower

altitude sandwiched between the two. But once she starts a more thorough search, Ellen might notice this area below the overpass, so we need to put as much distance between us as we can.)”

Either way, the decision was not Kamijou’s to make.

It was Unidentified Flying Girl Fran who controlled the ad-balloon of an unidentified flying object (which was an accurate description in this case). The round radar on her butt moved left and right a few times, and then…

“Now.”

She moved them out without asking.

Kamijou was along for the ride and he nearly screamed, but he just barely managed to swallow his outburst. They silently left the overpass and glided at low altitude toward the nearby tunnel.

A few of the girls were still on the overpass, so Kamijou felt a squeezing at his heart. He held onto the wire and pointlessly curled up his back to make himself look as small as possible. Luckily, Ellen called for the girls and they moved toward the end of the overpass. If they had turned their heads even slightly, it would have been game over.

The boy and girl continued into the tunnel.

Academy City’s power had yet to recover, so there was no risk of being hit by a subway train without warning. If they continued on and on through the tunnel without setting foot on the ground, they would have better odds of losing Ellen.

Kamijou quietly sighed, but then he felt something cold on his side.

He could not tell what it was inside the pitch black tunnel, but then the entire lower surface of the balloon glowed like a paper lantern on a construction site at night.

“Uuh!?”

The balloon was well made. It may have had a theatre spotlight inside for making fake abductions, but with the wire hanging down from the round object, it looked like the fluorescent lights hanging from the ceiling of Japanese-style rooms.

Kamijou blinked his dazzled eyes until they adjusted and he could compare the scene in his mind with the actual one.

He saw what it was touching his bare side.

Rabbit-Ear Antennae Fran's small hand held something through the baggy sleeve of her hoodie. It was a silver blade as long as an index finger. Kamijou felt a chill in his stomach when he initially thought it was one of the butterfly knives that delinquents swung around like nunchuks, but a closer look showed it was a part of a multi-tool. The handle of a pair of pliers contained a screwdriver, a gimlet, and other tools. Annoyingly enough, it was Swiss-made. The original craftsman had to be crying.

"I would like to make something clear before we go any further."

"…"

"I am on Kamisato Kakeru's side and not on Kamijou Touma's side. I am only helping you here because I decided this was the best thing for Kamisato-chan."

She sounded like she was reading off the important clauses of a contract.

There was no change in her eyes. They were the same when she blew bubbles in the kiddie pool, when she was on the run from all the other girls, and when she pressed a tool knife against his vitals.

She could stab him as easily as playing with the straw in a melon soda.

The pointy-haired boy was no more important than that to Fran.

"Please do what it takes to help Kamisato-chan. As long as you are doing that, I will assist you however I can. But if you prioritize Kamijou Touma over Kamisato Kakeru even once, it ends there. No matter what the situation, I will not hesitate to cut you away."

"I know that," spat back Kamijou. He did not pause at all. "He saved my life. I would be a piece of charcoal down underground right now if not for him. So there's nothing in it for me this time. I'll risk my life to rescue Kamisato."

"Very good then."

She pulled back the tool knife with surprising ease.

The rabbit-ear girl closed the knife inside the pliers with a single hand and then her lips finally formed a smile despite how out of place it was here. It was like a flower bud slowly opening at the start of spring after being frozen all winter. It may have been an expression of respect and affection for someone who was willing to act on Kamisato Kakeru's behalf.

“With that settled, I’m hungry. Let’s find something to eat.”

“Hey, wait. You’re prioritizing yourself five seconds after saying all that?”

Part 3

Directly below the Windowless Building in Academy City’s District 7 was a strange underground space with countless largescale rocket boosters dangling from the ceiling like stalactites.

In a lab coat and red bikini, Kihara Yuiitsu elegantly sat there while tending to her fingernails. Her left hand had nail polish, but her right hand was only quickly clipped without even being filed. In fact, the very shape of the hands was different. That was a certain boy’s right hand sewn on by a weakened Sample Shoggoth like a stuffed animal.

That was World Rejecter.

But at the moment, its tremendous power was less important than how it functioned as chains for those many girls.

“I see, I see, I see.”

After filing down the nails to give them the proper round outline, she tried to decide what kind of polish to use. She did not have a color that would match a high school boy’s nails. The same color as her left hand would look conspicuously out of place, but she could not have the right and left hands’ colors clash too much. Then again, it was strange enough for a single person to have mismatched hands.

“It’s been 10 minutes since I ordered them to kill Kamijou Touma. Around 100 of them left on this human hunt, but they’ve lost sight of him and are searching blindly. First they let him escape and then they almost immediately give up and report back to me. I get the feeling they have their feet on the brakes juuust a little, at least subconsciously.”

Yuiitsu crossed her legs and spoke while showing off a bit too much alluring white to be called a lady. Her gaze never left her fingernails. She did not even look toward the other person.

Her chair creaked a little.

Nevertheless, she let her weight bear down on it and casually continued speaking in her swimsuit and lab coat.

“The Kamisato Faction shook up Academy City so much, so I seriously doubt this is the best they can do. Or did I overestimate them? What are your thoughts on that?”

She heard a quiet groan.

Yuiitsu smiled thinly, raised her left hand’s index finger, and casually jabbed it into her chair.

No, that was the brown girl named Salome who was down on all fours and Yuiitsu’s finger jabbed into her back just below the neck.

Although the term “all fours” may not have been entirely accurate. The white school swimsuit and raincoat girl had lost an arm in the earlier battle, so she only had three legs as a chair.

But Kihara Yuiitsu rested her full body weight on her all the same.

If the girl tilted even slightly, the woman would not hesitate to jab her finger deep into that unresisting back. By tormenting the joints of Salome’s spine, pain exploded in her like lightning had struck her.

If Salome had not been a self-made cyborg, she would have long since died. Not from blood loss, but from shock.

“Pant, pant. Khah!?”

“You look displeased. Do you still not know your place here?”

Yuiitsu giggled and boldly crossed her legs again.

“Or would you prefer I did it with your Onii-chan’s finger?”

“…!?”

The incredibly fierce sound of clenching teeth filled the entire space, but Yuiitsu found it unbearably lovely. But not the brown girl. That mad scientist loved the situation.

“It really does feel rarer when it belongs to someone else, doesn’t it?”

She did not expect an answer, but that may have been part of the joy of stealing that burned in her heart.

She licked the boy's finger as she spoke.

"It's like I can feel his cries of suffering through what I've taken from him… Yesss, it isn't quite like taking that first step in a field of fresh snow, but it's nice in its own way."

Kihara Yuiitsu had no real reason to so persistently pursue and kill Kamijou Touma.

Based on what she had said, she simply wished to indirectly take revenge on someone who was "no longer here" by dirtying the hands of those girls.

As long as it let her crush what Kamisato Kakeru cared about, anything would have worked. She could have torn off their limbs and chucked them inside a cheap hotel in some foreign country.

So why had she included Kamijou Touma in her revenge?

There was no strategic reason for it and she finished her self-analysis as an extension of her wandering thoughts.

"…Yes. If I am to take revenge on everyone who hurt Sensei, then Kamisato Kakeru alone may not be enough."

She stuck her fingertip between the two shoulder blades and enjoyed how the chair jerked below her.

Kamijou Touma had no direct connection to Kihara Noukan's fate.

But this too was a way of destroying someone's possession to hear them scream.

In other words…

"Academy City and Kamijou Touma. I bet Aleister is screaming right about now as I ruin his precious collection."

Part 4

After floating two or three kilometers through the powerless subway tunnel, Rabbit-Ear Antennae Fran casually hopped from the wire to the ground. She must have decided they had traveled far enough to avoid being directly “traced” by Ellen.

The balloon was hers, so Kamijou did not argue the point. He simply followed her lead.

“There doesn’t seem to be anyone around here…”

“This is a subway tunnel, so of course there isn’t.”

“No, not that. I’m just surprised how little sign of human life there is when we really aren’t that far away.”

During that 55 degree hell full of Elements, these underground spaces had been off limits for shelter. The Elements had preferred to hide in dark and cool places, so these spaces had become their dens. Even if the heat wave had had less of an effect, the spaces would have been far from safe with an endless stream of Elements rushing in.

“But it didn’t seem like the Elements ate normal food. A subway station soba restaurant or something might not have been touched.”

“Hey, we can check the fridge if you want, but make sure you leave some money on the counter. Everything that wasn’t vacuum packed will probably have gone bad, but it still belongs to someone.”

“I don’t know the market value of industrial ingredients.”

When he heard that nonchalant response, Kamijou just about held his head in his hands. She was right, but no one would be happy with a random guess due to ignorance. In fact, the way Fran waved her round tail-like radar antenna back and forth as she walked made it clear she planned on tricking him into thinking a dozen chikuwa or kamaboko were only 100 yen. But Kamijou Touma the supermarket sales connoisseur was prepared to see right through her lies.

As he thought about that, they started toward the closest subway station.

“?”

But they came to a stop when they saw what the UFO balloon’s abduction light brought into view.

It was white sand. No, it was more like the microplastic that was all the rage

recently(?). At any rate, a pile of sand had buried the steel track as if it had poured into the tunnel. It was a small pile at only a meter tall, but they could not even imagine where it had come from. There did not seem to be an exit to the surface nearby.

Kamijou looked up at the tunnel's ceiling.

"It wasn't from a duct, was it?"

"I don't see anything like that."

They could not stop here, so they crossed it and continued on. They came across a few more similar piles, including another tunnel entirely filled where it branched off from theirs.

It looked like opaque white or silver sand, but that was due to the reflection of the light and it was actually a collection of tiny, nearly transparent granules.

After some thought, an idea finally occurred to Kamijou.

"Could this be the remains of the Elements…?"

Not even he entirely believed it. He and his companions had defeated a few Elements to survive that hell, but the Elements had always fallen apart at the joints instead of crumbling into sand like this.

Fran crouched down and scooped up some of the white sand in her hands.

"Is this a unique reaction when they self-destruct on Kihara Yuiitsu's command?"

"Maybe, but we have no way of investigating it further."

At any rate, they had to keep going. They crossed the white hills and finally arrived at the dark subway station. Fran placed her hands on the raised platform.

"Nn, yo."

"Why are you wiggling your little butt around? Some kind of new diet exercise?"

Exasperated, Kamijou pushed on Fran's soft butt from below until she managed to climb into the platform. The spiky-haired boy then pulled himself up like he was climbing onto the poolside and he finally breathed a sigh of relief. He had known no trains were coming, but walking along the track had still been nerve-racking.

They did not even need the hoodie bikini girl's tool knife to enter the soba restaurant built alongside the platform. The shutter was not lowered and it was not locked. The first wave of Elements may have arrived while the manager was preparing it to open for the day. It was not clear what had happened to that manager, but there was at least no sign of blood stains.

Fran quickly got on all fours and lifted her butt's radar antenna as she stuck her head inside the industrial refrigerator.

Kamijou was prepared for the green onions, beef, and such to be in such a tragic state that the hoodie bikini girl collapsed backwards like she had been hit by a gas weapon, but that never happened. The fresh foods were all black and unusable, but it did not stink all that much.

(…Hm? Oh, they've filled the fridge with deodorizers so ingredients don't leave their smell behind.)

"Hm, hm, hm, hmmm. Oh, I found some vacuum-packed duck slices! I thought fish paste was the only thing you could eat without cooking it, so this is a nice surprise."

"Wait, defenseless butt girl. Try eating that without paying and I swear I'll give that ass a hard spanking."

Then Kamijou Touma, the world's great classifier, began his grand review.

"And wouldn't duck be pretty expensive? Plus, it isn't even raw. It's precooked and then vacuum packed, so on top of the cost of the ingredients, you have the seasonings, the processing, and the labor costs."

"But, but. It wouldn't make sense for it to cost 200 or 300 yen. I mean, it says here that duck meat soba only costs 250 yen!"

"I need to remember this soba place!? Ahem… Also, these naruto are surprisingly costly. I mean, a single bowl of soba only has two or three slices, right? This old man isn't going to let you have a whole one."

"What is with you and that weird characterization!? And that doesn't make sense! Kamaboko is made almost exactly the same way, but they barely cost anything! Aren't you just worrying too much now!?"

"Shut up. We're the ones walking in and rummaging through the fridge without permission. Standard market value doesn't apply. Of course there's going to be a markup."

Despite what he said, Kamijou also began searching through the refrigerator. The power was out, but everything protected by vacuum-packing seemed to be fine. The two of them were trying to rescue Kamisato, one of the world's most difficult problems, but they were taking a breakfast break that was one step away from being bandits.

It may have looked silly, but Kamijou could not laugh at it. The past few days had taught him all too well the importance of necessities like food, shelter, and clothing. Without the basics for his own survival, he could not react properly to help others.

As expected, no water came from the faucet, but a glass refrigerator case had some small plastic bottles of tea. The tea was lukewarm, but it helped to wet their throats.

"Nn, nn."

"Hey, Fran, calm down a little. Do you want to eat the duck slices that badly?"

"It's a shame they're only flavored with soy sauce or mentsuyu, but I still won't let anyone have them."

"No one's going to take them from you. Here, I'll open the vacuum pack for you. In fact, I'm afraid of letting you keep it. I can already see it exploding like someone failing to open a bag of chips!"

"You say that, but you just want to steal my duck! Don't make me laugh!!"

His vision proved to be prophetic.

Something burst and Fran toppled backwards on the floor.

"Ah…"

"…Please don't talk to me for a while."

"This isn't the time for that. Get up, Fran. The floor is clean, so you can still eat it if you use the three second rule. Plus there's duck juice all over the place. Like your body."

Kamijou quickly picked up the duck slices and Fran finally decided to crawl up out of the abyss.

"Isn't this pure mentsuyu too salty? You should probably dilute it with something, but we don't have any water… This paper package has…cooking sake. No, that

would be a bad idea. If the gas was running, we could have cooked the alcohol out of it."

The meat itself probably had not been seasoned very much, but it had been sealed in with the sauce. The hoodie bikini girl slowly got up while wrinkling her brow and she looked down at her modest chest.

"Mhh, this is going to stain my swimsuit."

"There's a rag here, but no water. Do you think tea would work?"

Kamijou stopped speaking and nearly choked.

Just as he heard the rustling of cloth, the rabbit-ear antennae girl grabbed the string inside the large V-shaped opening of her hoodie and pulled out her bikini top.

"Wait, what?!"

"?"

Still sitting on the floor, Fran began sucking the duck sauce out of her bikini top. Her hoodie was unzipped to the very bottom, so the view of her chest as she looked up at him and tilted her head was quite dangerous.

She did not seem aware of the problem, so she used her small lips to do battle with the top, removed it from her mouth, and stared at it. Once she was satisfied, she stuck her tongue out and licked the cloth.

"Nmh. Good, it didn't get the flavor in it. …Hm?"

"What is it now?"

"I thought my hips felt restless, but it looks like the bottom is wet too."

Her tone was so carefree that Kamijou had ignored what she said, but then he thought his heart had leaped out of his chest.

"Wait, you idiot! That's going too far…!"

"Eiya."

The Maginot Line had been destroyed.

After her silly cry, Fran pulled her bikini bottom from just above the thighs

surrounded by her hoodie. The zipper only connected the very bottom of the hoodie, making it something like a miniskirt, but this was still dangerous. Extremely dangerous. Fran's defenses were about as sturdy as a house of cards.

(O-ohh. So that's what that triangle of cloth looks like when you untie the side strings and remove it…)

A distant look entered Kamijou's eyes as he stared at the hourglass or H-shaped silhouette, but Fran simply prepared to suck out the duck juice like she had before. But this time she came to a stop and wrinkled her brow.

Yes. It was a poor mealtime topic, but that cloth covered her crotch.

The rabbit-ear antennae girl shook her head with her top and bottom protected only by a hoodie opened in a V-shape, but then she noticed the pointy-haired boy in front of her.

"…"

"If it makes you look that unhappy, then don't hold it out toward me. In fact, don't force your perversion onto me!!"

Kamijou Touma did not want to earn the insane trophy of "sucked on a girl's bikini bottom at mealtime like it was pickled radish".

"The standard way of getting out a stain is to tap it with a cloth. This dried rag should be enough for something this minor. Swimsuits are made to repel water, so it shouldn't have gotten deep into the fabric."

"Will it really be okay? I don't have a change of clothes, so I'll be in trouble without this."

"If you get why that would be a problem, then at least put the top back on, Fran. This is the open world survival game known as Academy City, so you never know when a mischievous kitty is going grab the string and run off with it."

It was probably already fine, but after that work, he wet the cloth with some of the bottled tea and wiped it down again. Tea had deodorizing properties, so he was pretty sure this would keep her from becoming the mysterious duck sauce girl whose crotch smelled like a soba restaurant.

"Here. All done, Fran."

"Nn."

The rabbit-ear antennae girl moved her hands inside the hidden zone within her hoodie to put on the bikini bottom, but then she shivered like someone had traced their finger down her back.

“?”

“Th-there’s an indescribably unpleasant dampness…”

“Is complaining all you ever do!? Quit acting like a princess about the silliest things!!”

After they finished eating, Fran (who once more wore both pieces of her bikini) held her nose with the small hands in the hoodie’s baggy sleeves.

“Fweh, achoo!”

“Oh, yeah. It is December, isn’t it?”

“It’s because I got a chill.”

“Don’t blame me for wetting down the bikini! Wouldn’t it be because you stripped off the bikini!?”

Kamijou shouted back on reflex, but then he shivered too.

“Hey, Fran. Instead of switching the heat wave off altogether, can you weaken it just enough to keep us warm?”

“The station in orbit wasn’t designed to make microwave attacks. That attack was tricky to pull off at all, so I can’t make slight adjustments.”

“Just how tricky are we talking about?”

Kamijou had only thought of it like burning a piece of paper with a magnifying glass, but…

“That would be like frying an egg with a nuclear reactor.”

“And that doesn’t scare you? Why would you make something like that and put it up in satellite orbit!?”

“It doesn’t actually use nuclear power. It only creates similar levels of energy.”

“It’s scary either way!”

With Salome the self-made cyborg, Claire whose cells were closer to plant matter than human cells, and this, just how uninhibited was the Kamisato Faction? Kamisato had feared them losing control and going on a rampage, but that was looking like no laughing matter.

“At any rate, we need to find some winter clothing.”

“Nn. There’s no point in showing all this skin when…I can’t show it to Kamisato-chan.”

She briefly hesitated in the middle of her sentence.

She had likely not wanted to say herself that he was gone.

“Hey.” Kamijou intentionally changed the subject. “While I do want to get some winter clothing as soon as possible, do you think it would be okay if we stopped by my dorm?”

“Since you even asked, I assume you know how dangerous that would be.”

“Well, yeah.”

“Give up on that idea. Ellen and the others will be watching everything related to your school. That includes your dorm and the school itself.”

“Hm?”

The conversation had taken a strange turn.

“I get where I live, but the school too?”

“Of course they would search out who your friends are.”

“You mean…people like Aogami Pierce and Tsuchimikado are in danger?”

A strange chill ran down his spine.

He was only an individual, so multiple simultaneous attacks scared him more than anything. How many people could he protect if the 100 girls with special powers attacked his friends and acquaintances in 100 different places at the same time?

But Fran shook her head.

“I doubt that.”

“Eh? Why?”

He would of course prefer that, but wasn’t she being naïve? Couldn’t their pursuers achieve checkmate much more easily if they took multiple hostages?

“First, the internet, phone, and the rest of the information infrastructure are still down from the microwave attack. Even if they have a hostage, they can’t let you know that.”

“Ah.”

“And second, this city might seem normal to you since you live here, but it’s very strange for those of us from outside Academy City. Any of the boys and girls we see walking along the street might be an esper who could survive a hit from a nuke. I don’t know what the odds of that really are, but no one would triumphantly accept a game of concentration where flipping over a joker means instant death.”

She may have been referring to the #1 who had charged into the center of the Kamisato Faction or the #3 who seemed to have run into Salome. If so, those were extreme exceptions, but then something occurred to Kamijou.

Yes. Ellen, Elza, and the others did not know that.

There might only be one joker within the 53 cards or all 53 might be jokers. When the cards were already flipped over, it was the same as a dense jungle minefield. The number of mines was less of an issue than whether or not there were any mines at all.

Which meant…

“The safest option will be for Ellen and the others to monitor the places you tend to go and prevent you from regrouping with any of your friends. They have no idea who they might drive to action with a hostage, so I doubt they’ll choose to attack or imprison anyone.”

Of course, that was not an absolute guarantee.

If the truth was revealed and their analysis showed they were up against a Level 0, they would not hesitate to abduct them. And if they started to feel cornered, the opportunity might quickly outweigh the risk.

“But,” sharply added the hoodie bikini girl. “That changes if someone is already working with you. If a conflict is inevitable, they will likely try to crush that person in a short-term battle before the damage can spread.”

“You mean I would be putting them in danger if I tried to contact them or protect them!?”

“Depending on how you look at it.”

There was no absolute safety here.

That meant he had to look at it in terms of probability.

He narrowed his eyes, but then…

“…?”

He heard a noise.

The sound of thick rubber tearing at the ground came from above the ceiling. With their stomachs full of precooked bird meat or fish paste, Kamijou and Fran exchanged a glance and spoke the question on their minds.

“A car is running…?”

“A car???”

Part 5

It normally would have been drowned out by the countless noises of people’s lives, but with the many circuit boards of the vehicle control systems fried, the one moving vehicle sounded very, very loud.

Kamijou and Fran left the subway station soba restaurant, walked through the dark station using the UFO balloon’s abduction light, climbed the stairs, pushed up the girl’s small butt to get her and her huge backpack over the nonfunctioning ticket gate, and ran outside.

They noticed the oddity as soon as they left the subway station entrance.

Due to the previous chaos, thick wires were strung between buildings and the first floor doors and windows were barricaded, but some of the passageways and walls had still been destroyed. And just like the subway tunnel, there were piles of white sand located here and there. They were bigger than in the tunnel, some

even reaching three stories tall. It looked like about a third of the street was half buried in a desert. The asphalt was still visible, but the white sand was much worse.

Kamijou doubted a car could drive through this, yet there was indeed something there.

“What…is that?”

He instinctually crouched down to hide himself.

He tilted his head when he tried to figure out why he had even done that.

The vehicle slowly driving down the road could only be described as a half truck. It was a truck with a large bed on the back, but the front wheels and back wheels were clearly powered in different ways. The back wheels had been made into steel treads, while the front wheels…what even were they? What looked like countless insect legs wriggled around as they dug deeply into the white sand to climb the hills. It worked entirely differently, but the movement was a lot like the mouth of an ammonite or a nautilus.

What was it?

And who was driving it?

Kamijou and Fran cautiously observed it as it moved. The exposed truck bed had several large speakers attached like it was an advertisement truck for a new song. A polite female voice spoke from those.

“We are from Useful Spider of Academy City’s Disaster Recovery Committee. We will now report on the present situation: Now that the enemy factors known as Elements are confirmed to have ceased functioning, the current time has been set as the beginning of the ‘48 Hours to Restore Order’. We urge everyone using an unofficial shelter to obey the instructions of any Useful Spider member.”

Kamijou sighed when he heard that smooth adult voice.

Academy City was finally moving toward recovery. He could return to his life of turning on the TV in his air-conditioned room, messing around on his phone, and checking on the contents of his refrigerator when he was hungry. The Kamisato and Yuiitsu problem remained, but this was still progress. He could feel his tensed legs and hips relaxing.

The adults had likely stored that half truck deep underground where the microwaves could not reach it. They might lose some points for waiting until now

to show up, but recovery work tended to begin only after the typhoon had left. Looking at it that way, he could not criticize them for it.

But Fran remained tense as her antennae extended in all directions from her backpack.

As an outsider, she had no attachment to life in Academy City.

"…Strange."

"What is?"

"How can they be so sure that the Elements have all stopped functioning? Only you should know what they are and how they got switched off since you ran into Kihara Yuiitsu yourself. Even I only heard all that secondhand. How does someone who wasn't under that building know that?"

"Ah."

"There is one clear risk here," whispered Fran while seemingly showing off her flat chest with her hoodie and bikini. "Those adults might be secretly connected to someone who knows the truth. For example, another adult like Kihara Yuiitsu."

That was a horrifying thought.

Kamijou just about snapped back on reflex, but that may have been due to the fear of having this hope snatched away from him.

But then the half truck said more in the same calm woman's voice.

"We also suspect the following people are deeply connected to this series of disasters: 1. Kamijou Touma. 2. Karasuma Fran. On our special authority, both of them will temporarily have their fundamental human rights revoked. If you see them in your shelter or elsewhere, do not speak to them and report it to Useful Spider. I repeat…"

"!?"

Kamijou knew it was pointless, but he crouched further down and took a step back toward the stairs down to the subway station.

"Dammit, they're after us here too!?"

This was very bad and he felt his stomach churning. The microwaves of Fran's heatwave had almost entirely knocked out the internet and the phone system.

And with that analog loudspeaker, whoever was loudest would win. If everyone obediently viewed Kamijou and Fran in a hostile light, their enemies could grow from the former Kamisato Faction to the city's entire population of 2.3 million.

"Are they really connected to Kihara Yuiitsu?" wondered Fran. "But that doesn't really make sense either."

"What is it now!?"

"Your name is one thing, but they have no reason to give my name in Academy City. I don't know anyone here, so they can't get any information from friends of mine by mentioning it. So why did they need to use my real name?"

"Well, we at least know it was someone who knows your full name that ordered this. We only ever called you Fran, so who told Yuiitsu the Karasuma part?"

"…No." The girl's rabbit-ear antennae drooped a little as she brought a hand to her chin. "Yuiitsu might not be involved."

"What?"

"Very few people know my name is Karasuma Fran. But then how did that information get from those girls to Useful Spider? The phones and computers were wiped out, so…don't tell me."

After watching the half truck pass by with its strange combination of bug legs and treads, Fran slowly stood up.

She shook around the round antenna on her butt and spoke quietly.

"It might be best to check on this despite the risk."

"Where are you going? And what are you checking on?"

"The closest shelter. And what data medium they are currently using."

Part 6

With the heat wave gone, he had thought they would be freed from the water problem.

With the Elements gone, he had thought everyone could walk on the ground without worrying.

With both problems solved, he had thought their normal lives would return.

But the world had gradually changed. It was just like repairing the fresco on a cathedral wall. Even when the same paint was periodically added to fix the damage, the original was gradually lost and it would eventually display an entirely different interpretation.

It was a strange sight.

Had he felt this great a weight in his stomach even when the heat wave and Elements had threatened Academy City?

“A park…?” muttered Kamijou Touma in the chilly gray city.

Even with the heat wave and Elements completely gone, the normal work and school schedule had not returned. If the nearest shelter provided signs of life to ensure people gathered, they would eventually reach that point, but Kamijou had to question that anew once he arrived there.

“I’m surprised people are gathering in such an open space.”

The park was of a far higher grade than a children’s park with some playground equipment and a sandbox built in the extra space of a residential area. Its trees and grass preserved the colors of nature even in the concrete city, it had a large lake, and it was probably used for fireworks shows and outdoor concerts. The trees had withered in the heat wave, but the lake had probably been an important source of water. But what about the Elements? If the people had gathered in that open space, wouldn’t they have been wiped out in less than half a day?

“Not necessarily,” readily answered Hoodie Bikini Fran. “Indoors and outdoors didn’t really matter. Even if you built barricades to protect your school or hospital, it was obvious what would happen if one of those 100 meter Elements was intent on breaking in.”

“…”

He had known that, but he shuddered hearing it from someone else. Aogami Pierce and Fukiyose Seiri had worked so hard to protect that school building, but it all could have fallen apart at any time.

“That means an environment where the Elements can’t find you would be better

than thick and solid walls. Even if there's only a thin layer of paper between you, you won't be attacked if they can't find you. Although I can't say whether these people did it intentionally or lucked onto a spot like that."

At any rate, they had to approach the shelter to gather information.

What had happened to Academy City without the heat wave and Elements?

Who was this Useful Spider unit strutting around the city? How had they decided Kamijou and Fran were enemies?

Just as Kamijou started to walk toward the large park, Fran stopped him by grabbing his hand through her baggy sleeve.

"Wait a minute."

"What is it?"

"We may be something like wanted criminals here in Academy City. Unlike me, they probably have plenty of personal information on you, such as what you look like. The people of the shelter might surround you the instant you walk in."

He realized she was right.

They only knew that Useful Spider was after them, but they could not imagine how far that information had spread and what level of hatred and disgust it had caused. They would run into trouble if the hostility was greater than they thought.

"I've got to do something."

Fran (barely) wore a pajama hoodie over her swimsuit, but Kamijou only wore his swim trunks. Even if he was not after a disguise, he wanted some normal clothes. Even if this country was relatively fine with swimming in the cold, he did not want to wander around in a swimsuit during December. And a shirt and pants were not going to just fall from the sky if he wished for them, so he decided to approach the park and search for something on the outskirts.

"I feel like the hero breaking people's pots to gather herbs. When can I get back to my normal life of withdrawing money from the ATM and running to the supermarket sale?"

"(Really, it's kind of a mystery if the major bank databases are even functioning anymore.)"

Once they reached the park's large parking lot, they found a ton of stuff they

could probably use. In fact…

“That’s a lot of trucks.”

“Looks like a festival.”

Rabbit-Ear Antennae Fran was right. The heat wave and Elements may have arrived while they were setting up in the early morning a few days before. There were a lot of industrial trucks and a lot of metal pipes, plastic sheets, and small compressed gas cylinders were just sitting out. If it was all put together, it would probably become festival stands.

There was also a lot of music equipment. In addition to the standard guitars, drum set, and microphones, there were also large speakers, cables, and industrial lights. The computer music equipment and everything else electronic seemed to be broken, though.

As he checked through a few large cardboard boxes, he found an interesting banner.

“Kigurumi Rock Fes?”

“Kigurumi?”

He and Fran tilted their heads in unison. It was unclear why, but after that event had been canceled it seemed to have become a shelter. The date on the banner was December 4. Kamijou recognized that date. It was the unforgettable day when the heat wave and Elements attacked the city. It looked like the festival really had been attacked while setting up.

And whether it was a coincidence or not, the park may have been lucky. The water quality would be a problem, but the manmade lake had plenty of water and the metal pipes and plastic sheets for the festival stands would have been useful for building things. The gas cylinders and generators would also have been useful. More importantly, they had food. Festival stands tended to make things like takoyaki and okonomiyaki, so flour would have been plentiful. And during that heat wave, any food that could be preserved without refrigeration would have been truly valuable.

At any rate…

“Borrowing something from here would probably be best. Those costumes will cover my face and it would probably be nice and warm.”

It was unclear what things were like in the shelter, but due to the Kigurumi Rock

Fes, it might not be all that unusual for a bear or rabbit to be walking around. Kamijou had no real preference, so he pulled a random costume out of a cardboard box.

“What about you, Fran?”

“Mnn.”

“Yeah, it wouldn’t work for you. Your backpack is too big.”

With that exasperated comment, Kamijou picked up a strange character that looked like a mixture of an alien and a rabbit. It may have been going for a creepy kind of cute.

But then Hoodie Bikini Fran’s eyes opened wide and she said something meaningless.

“W-wafu.”

“?”

“Ahem. I-it’s nothing.”

He gave her a curious glance, but the expressionless rabbit-ear antennae girl looked away and blushed for some reason.

Kamijou could not deal with that. If the information about him had included a photo, it was dangerous keeping his face exposed in a populated area. He unzipped the back, climbed inside the torso that smelled a bit strongly of bug spray, and placed the head over his own head.

“Wow…I have no peripheral vision at all. It’s like staring through the peephole of the front door.”

Luckily, he would not need Fran’s help to put it on or take it off. Just like a sleeping bag, it had a zipper on the inside and outside. His vision was poor and his footing was unsteady, but it was nice and warm with his body heat gathering inside.

And before he could get used to the costume, someone hit him with a fierce tackle. He desperately worked to hold his ground in his surprise, but then he found it was Fran.

“Wafu! Wafu wafu! Bunny Grey!!”

“Wh-what!?”

She was not listening. The girl’s brain seemed to have been fried. The hoodie swimsuit girl squeezed her eyes shut and embraced him with her entire body like a small child. And while pressing up against him, she wiggled the round antennae on her butt back and forth. Kamijou finally realized what was going on.

“Bunny Grey is…standing and moving right in front of me…wafu.”

“Hey, stop! It’s me! It’s Kamijou Touma. Forget about this Bunny Grey thing!”

“!!!???”

She must have come back to her senses because she shoved him away with both hands. He could not keep his balance in the costume and toppled right over.

“Y-you disgust me! How dare you use such a cheap method of gaining my trust!?”

“That was all you…”

“D-don’t think this is enough for me to…Bunny…don’t think…Bunny Grey… drool…”

This unidentified flying girl seemed to be prone to delusions, so she was the type that would forget all about her job and about gathering customers once she set foot in the magic kingdom. Fran fidgeted and could not calm down, so Kamijou remained 120% cautious as he slowly stood up.

“Anyway, let’s go look around the park shelter.”

“Nn.”

The popular Bunny Grey began observing the scene with a rabbit-ear antennae girl clinging to his side. They walked around the lake at the center of the park.

A few comb-like barricades made of metal pipes tied together with wire were carelessly sitting around, but Kamijou and Fran could walk right through them. Instead of blocking the Elements’ way, there were shower-like devices in the manmade woods. They were made to produce a fine mist to cool people down during the summer.

“The Elements prefer dark and cool places…”

“Looks like they diverted them away instead of building strong walls.”

Just like an IV, the sprayers had their tanks set up above them so the water would pass through without needing any electricity. The branches of the trees also helped. It seemed to be made up of conifer trees that kept their leaves during the winter, so they had likely created a lot of shade in the sun.

The idea was fundamentally different from Kamijou's school holed up in a reinforced concrete building. Of course, this method was not possible without excess water.

The shelter's living space was strongly influenced by the Kigurumi Rock Fes. It was unclear what determined the grades, but there were houses built from cardboard, plastic sheets, and metal containers. And they were naturally removed from the darker and cooler places that would draw the Elements. The costumes lying around may have been used as sleeping bags.

None of it was perfect, so they saw some blocks that had been destroyed. Had that been an early period when they were still figuring out how to keep the Elements out, or had they screwed up and been attacked a few times after setting it all up?

More importantly…

"What? There aren't that many people here. There should be far more given the number of houses."

It was true the heat wave and Elements were gone now, so the people had no real reason to stay in the shelter. They could return to their homes and dorms just fine. But they did not know why the two threats had vanished. They might hesitantly observe things outside the shelter, but it would be hard to boldly walk around freely. The fear of the heat wave and Elements would be too fresh.

The groups of middle and high school students they saw had their arms around their own bodies to fight the cold, but they were still only wearing a coat or blanket over their swimsuit. They were uncomfortable, but they could not change. That may have been proof that their hearts had not caught up to the changing circumstances.

Which meant…

"They must still be inside the shelter, so are they mostly gathered in a single spot?"

"Grey, I hear some noise from over there."

Hoodie Bikini Fran pointed into the distance while clinging to him (or rather, the Bunny Grey costume) from the side. They wanted to know what was happening in Academy City with the heat wave and Elements gone and they wanted to know what information was being spread. The shortest path would be blending into the biggest crowd of people.

But for some reason, Costume Boy Kamijou was reluctant to go.

He sensed something blocking his way. It was like a sinister and invisible miasma that he could not afford to be trapped by. It was like waving at a fishing boat passing by the bank at night only to find they were mixing chopped-up corpses into the bait and throwing it into the ocean.

“L-let go of me, Saten-san! I have to do something…”

“Even if you’re in Judgment, there’s nothing you can do on your own, Uiharu! With that many people, anyone would be in trouble if they get caught in the middle of it. So we need to gather an even greater number of adults!!”

“B-but! But!!”

They passed by two arguing girls. They were fleeing as if they had seen a giant gray hurricane rising above the horizon.

Strange warning bells were going off in Kamijou’s head: Don’t get involved. Leave. Nothing good will come of learning about this.

A miasma or a premonition were occult ideas, so he desperately tried to shake off the sticky feeling and spoke to Fran.

“Let’s check this out.”

That arrogant rabbit-ear antennae girl was unable to say anything this time.

With each step they took, the ominous miasma grew thicker. The strange sense squeezing at his heart turned out to be sound. More accurately, it was voices. The countless overlapping voices were all coming from one direction, but they could not make out what any one voice was saying. It may have been like a park speaker giving a warning about a tsunami or forest fire that grew incomprehensible after echoing again and again.

Whatever was being said, they could tell it was nothing good and the burning negative emotion came through all too clear. The crowd of people producing the voices came into view. It looked like some kind of ceremony being held near a few metal poles meant to raise flags by the lake. They were too far away to tell what

was happening at the center, especially with all the people in the way.

“Don’t…! …acted like…dictator!! We…to…punish…!!”

“…your fault…so many…died. …not…slaves!!”

“Everyone…suffering…but you…like a king!! Kept the…for yourself!!”

At first, Kamijou did not understand.

But as he got closer, he could tell the people were shouting some kind of criticism.

His costumed legs approached the angry crowd.

Unlike Kamijou, Fran’s nose was exposed and she may have been able to sense the smell in the air because the round radar antenna on her butt twitched and she whispered to him.

“Grey, be careful.”

A moment later, he saw something between the heads of the crowd.

A man had his hands tied behind his back and a thick wire around his neck.

And the metal flagpole was being used as a gallows.

“How dare you call yourself our leader!? You acted like a king while taking everything from us!!”

“Kill the tyrant!! Execute the dictator!!”

“The heat wave and Elements are gone now. We don’t need to suck up to you anymore!!”

Kamijou felt a tremor run through his hands and feet and then up his spine.

The two threats were gone, but the people in this shelter had decided to do something other than check on things outside or return home: executing the ruler they no longer needed. All of their pent up frustrations had erupted once the disasters vanished.

Freedom had to be somewhat restricted to keep a shelter running. Even in Kamijou’s school, none of the students had been satisfied with the water rations they had been given. It would not have lasted otherwise. But once it was over,

that was no longer necessary and only their simmering dissatisfaction remained. Just like boiling salt water until only the solid salt remained.

The ruler here seemed to be a man approaching middle age.

Kamijou did not know this man in a work uniform who had a wire around his neck. He might have been one of the people who performed inside the costumes, he might have been one of the people who put together the stands, and he might have been the park manager.

“Enough! Hang him already!! We’ve made our judgment, so kill him!!”

“You called this place a democratic Trial, so we’ll kill you the way you would’ve wanted. We voted unanimously for the death sentence!!”

“Like hell we had any free will after you drew in so many people by spreading our food and water around!!”

They were right on the limit, so their ruler was standing on his tiptoes. The wire was digging deep into his throat. His windpipe or arteries must have been somewhat compressed because his face grew unnaturally red and even swelled out a little.

Kamijou started feeling faint just watching it.

Bunny Grey staggered a few steps back, so Hoodie Bikini Fran supported him from the side with her small body. She whispered with her white breath while pressing up against him.

“(Yes, that’s what you need to do.)”

“?”

“(Our goal is rescuing Kamisato-chan. We came here to investigate our wanted status because that might get in our way, but this is clearly an unnecessary detour. It would be safest to leave while they’re all focused on that. It’s possible the excited crowd won’t be satisfied just with executing their ruler and will look for further victims.)”

“You can’t be-…”

Kamijou started to shout back on reflex, but then he heard a dull sound near his stomach. He was wearing a thick costume, so he could not feel much from outside and thus felt no pain. However, Hoodie Bikini Fran’s small hand held her tool knife and she had stuck the finger-long blade shallowly into Bunny Grey’s

stomach.

“(Why are you making me stab Bunny Grey?)”

He gasped and the rabbit-ear antennae girl spat out her usual emotionless voice.

“(Did you forget what I said in the beginning? As long as you prioritize Kamisato Kakeru over Kamijou Touma, then I will help you out unconditionally. But if you break that contract, it ends here. I will give up on you and go elsewhere.)”

She was serious.

Fran was entirely serious. If something was going to get in the way of escaping the 100 girls and rescuing Kamisato Kakeru, she would nip it in the bud. And this was not something she had resolved herself to do; it came second-nature to her.

It was true this might be meaningless.

Rescuing this convicted ruler would not lead to Kamisato. Kamijou did not know how large the crowd was, but he would be making enemies of at least a hundred more people. It would be a serious problem if he was surrounded by that many unarmed people and a lot of them were armed with handmade weapons. Some had long metal pipes cut at an angle to make a spear, some had large hammers meant for driving stakes into the ground, and some had paint cans stuffed inside cloth bags. What looked like bazookas may have been the devices used to fire fireworks during a concert. The fact that it had nothing to do with esper powers made it even harder for Kamijou to get involved.

He would gain nothing from this. He would only end up with both enemy and ally after his life.

But Kamijou did not hesitate to reply.

“This is what Kamisato feared about all of you.”

“…”

“It’s because you care for him that you’re willing to take shortcuts. He was pretty twisted himself, but when you got down to it, he had normal sensibilities. After we rescue him, he wouldn’t want to know people died for it.”

Fran remained motionless while wearing her large backpack.

The blade stabbing shallowly into the thick costume repeatedly hesitated over whether to pull out or push in.

After a slow breath, the hoodie bikini girl finally made her decision.

The tool knife moved. It pulled out.

“(But what exactly are you going to do? There are at least 100 and they’ve gone mad with anger. You can’t break through them all without a giant laser or a bomber.)”

“Then let’s go the bomber route.”

She had meant that as a joke, but Kamijou’s reply was entirely sincere. The unidentified flying girl’s eyes widened, but Bunny Grey had more to say.

“It’s true they’re boiling with anger and could never be reasoned with. But what’s at the foundation of it all? If we think about that, we might be able to pull something off. …Come with me, Fran.”

Part 7

The fact that the accident occurred while the Kigurumi Rock Fes was being set up may have been fortunate for them all. There had been plenty of materials at the park. The shelter residents had used those to effectively divert the Elements, secure a living space, and cook enough flour-based food to satisfy their hunger.

The materials were a blessing to Kamijou and Fran as well.

They only had to look around a bit to find what they needed with almost careless ease.

“A gas cylinder?” asked Fran.

“That’s right.”

The thick gray metal container held propane, but it was not as tall as he was like the ones behind buildings. It was meant to heat the grill at a festival stand, so it was about the size of a small Daruma doll.

Hoodie Bikini Fran must have been displeased with this development because she began toying with the tool knife in her hand.

“Are you planning to throw it into the crowd and let it explode? They’re surrounding their ruler in a donut-shape, so a blast at one end won’t reach them all and one in the center would kill the ruler.”

“I wouldn’t do something so dangerous. The less actual damage the better. As far as stirring up their shock and fear is concerned, anyway.”

“?”

Fran looked doubtful and Kamijou skillfully continued his work using the costume’s mitten-like hands. There were a few ways to bypass the metal container’s safety devices to make it explode. He recalled one he had seen in an old action movie playing on TV the previous Sunday night. It had been called Heavy something-or-other and he was pretty sure a remake had come out recently.

“A lighter?”

“Any way of starting a fire would work. Good, this one uses static electricity, so it should work even underwater.”

He made some modifications, tied it together with duct tape, and carried the dangerous object in one hand. His destination was quite near that crowd and he had no time. While everyone was focused on their ruler’s imminent fate, he chucked the gas cylinder toward the cold lake water where anyone could see.

A pillar of water rose vertically from the surface and the explosion sounded loudly.

Everyone ducked down and turned toward the lake, but that was not enough for them to call off the execution. At this rate, they would resume hanging the man, so Costumed Kamijou gave an extra push. He went right toward the old wound of their greatest fear.

“It’s the Elements! They’re here!! Don’t let your guard down just because you can’t see them! They’re translucent and they can use their mimicry to blend into the background!! They’re a lot closer than you think!! Everyone, run!!!!!”

Silence followed.

But the look in their eyes was not one of doubt. This was simply too much for their minds to process. It was like suddenly finding a dump truck bumper approaching before their eyes.

After that one-beat delay, they were quick to react.

The crowd that had been so united in anger now scattered in every direction. They screamed meaningless things and fled with all their might. They sometimes ran into each other, tripped over each other, or knocked each other over. Kamijou wanted to cover his eyes, but they at least avoided any obvious death. The execution ground had fallen apart.

“But why did they react so sharply?”

“No matter how violent they’re acting, they didn’t leave the shelter. They were acting brave, but they haven’t escaped their fear of the heat wave and Elements. I understand how they feel. If I hadn’t been there with Kihara Yuiitsu and Kamisato Kakeru, no explanation would have convinced me to venture out of that school building.”

Some trauma was linked to a region or society.

It could be a bombing, a mass suicide, a derailed train, a serial killer, or a mass shooting. After a sad incident, anything reminiscent of it could trigger a large panic. In Academy City, the heat wave and Elements had reached that level. If someone found themselves in an unnaturally warm spot where the sunlight happened to gather after reflecting off the polished buildings, they might have trouble breathing. The metallic creaking of something blowing in the wind might sound like a monster and keep people up at night.

Kamijou had drawn out that fear.

Peeling off a half-healed scab could be more painful than the original injury.

And because they had been out of control, the fear had spread much more swiftly. No one had been calmly observing the situation, so they had all been thrown into the crucible of chaos.

He could do it now. He could remove the wire digging into the ruler’s neck.

“I didn’t think you could make up your mind that quickly,” said Fran.

“It wasn’t my idea.”

“?”

“I just asked myself what he would do. Although I bet Kamisato would have found a cleverer way to do it even without his special right hand.”

Regardless, they had to rescue the ruler from the gallows.

The panic would not last forever. Once the people stopped mistaking each other's screams for further explosions, they would start to question it. Kamijou had to rescue the ruler and allow him to escape before that happened.

A few boys and girls in swimsuits were groaning on the ground after being knocked over near the metal pole, but Kamijou and Fran ignored them and continued toward the ruler.

The man's eyes were filled with fear as he stood on his tiptoes.

"Hey, you in the costume! What do you mean the Elements are here!? I really don't need this situation to get any worse!!"

"You don't have to freak out. That was a bluff. They wouldn't run away unless I said something like that, right?"

The thick wire around the man's neck was not very flexible and the knot was relatively loose, so it was not difficult to remove.

"Bhah!!"

The man coughed as he was finally able to breathe comfortably. He wobbled and Hoodie Bikini Fran expressionlessly sidestepped the sweaty man. That meant he collapsed onto the ground, but he was still entirely thankful as he rubbed his throat.

"Ugh, cough. Thanks, you really saved me." He tearfully coughed a few more times. "As soon as they realized the danger was gone, they pulled this. And what is this Trial nonsense? I didn't choose to become their ruler during that heat wave. They're the ones that lifted me up and pulled away the ladder, dammit."

"You can do what you want, but you'll probably be safer leaving the shelter."

"Yeah, yeah. I'm getting the hell out of here. If the heat wave and Elements are really gone, there's no point in staying and letting them turn me into a human sacrifice." The man in the work uniform held his head in one hand. "But…dammit. How can they call this the 48 Hours to Restore Order? There's got to be a better way of doing it. That piece of junk they call a Sphere is so poorly managed that it's full of bullshit."

"What?"

"You don't know?" spat out the ruler as he pulled something from his work uniform's pocket. He tossed over a stick-like device that looked like USB memory. "I don't need this since I'm gonna scram. That's the key to the Sphere here in the

Trial shelter. Those Useful Spider people gave it to me. You get full access with that, so it isn't like the rest of those morons. I don't know who you are, but you must not be from this shelter if you're so calm. If you're gonna sneak in, find a way to get back at them. Bye."

Kamijou and Fran watched the ruler walked off on unsteady feet, but then they looked down at the stick-shaped device.

"The Sphere?"

"Sphere?"

Staring at it was not going to answer their questions. The costume had no pockets, so he left the key with Hoodie Bikini Fran before they resumed their search around the lake.

Things were different from before. That was most likely due to Kamijou bringing back their fear of the Elements, but the people were not just running wildly around. The wandering swimsuit-wearing group finally started moving in the same direction.

"What the hell is going on!?"

"What does the Sphere say? Is there a warning there?"

"Should we stay in the shelter or leave? The Sphere, the Sphere!!"

The frantic group kept calling that name, so they could apparently calm themselves by going to check some device known as the Sphere. Kamijou and Fran tilted their heads and followed the people. They spotted some carrot and frog costumes in addition to the swimsuits, so some of them may have given into the cold and worn their makeshift sleeping bags since they had arms and legs.

"I am curious about this Sphere, but…"

"Is there something else?"

"Ellen, Maya, and the others will be sensitive to any changes as they pursue us. Once they hear about that explosion you caused, they'll probably send in Elza, Salome, or the other fighters."

"Kh."

They were still on the run, so they had to hurry.

Then they spotted the Sphere.

“What is that?”

It may have originally been a metal sphere two meters across, but it had opened up in one direction like a lotus flower. It looked something like a planetarium. A faint layer of chemical smoke rose from the top, and hundreds if not thousands of windows were projected on the smoke to form a dome with a radius of 20 or 30 meters around the Sphere itself. Each window displayed information on other shelters, the weather forecast, what roads were blocked off, the progress of recovery work on infrastructure like power and water, distribution points for food and water, etc.

“It’s a disaster communication infrastructure base,” said Fran as she waved around the round radar antenna on her small butt. “During a disaster that knocks out the internet or phones, a lot of misinformation can spread and relying on your own disaster radios or TVs doesn’t seem very reliable, so I’ve heard there’s been a rush to develop a device that doubles as a broadcast tower and information source.”

She would be talking about outside the city. Academy City’s technology was 20 or 30 years ahead, so that device must have already been developed here.

“A clock.”

The costumed boy stated the obvious.

Yes, a few of the windows had that basic information, just like the corner of a TV.

“There’s a clock… Oh, so now everyone can know what time it is.”

Without their phones or the internet, all of the boys and girls were gathering here. They all looked malnourished on the nutrient known as information. It reminded Kamijou of the people watching a baseball or wrestling match on roadside TVs in old video footage.

And as far as he could see, the device was mostly made to receive news and administrative information, but the ability to send out their own information was extremely limited. They could only say which shelter they were in or post their own name on a simple message board.

The message board included the time of the post.

That was nothing special, but it seemed incredibly refreshing to Kamijou. He understood just how the boys and girls here had their craving fulfilled.

“This communication infrastructure is meant to avoid misinformation and confusion, so they’re preventing people from sending out whatever they want…”

The network did not seem to be connected freely like a spider web. It was more like a tournament diagram split into blocks. The thick line at the top had a mixture of information from all over, but each individual block had a strong local color.

But once inside a block, you could not avoid being colored by it and you would unquestioningly accept anything announced from above. A disaster environment functioned like an “open sealed room” where misinformation could easily spread. The boys and girls could only receive information and could not even choose which channel they watched. In a way, wasn’t this a dangerous situation too?

“…Oh, I get it.”

After watching from inside the Bunny Grey costume, Kamijou finally put his question to words.

“It isn’t anything weird. The system itself is a lot like a social media account, but it’s a broader framework. Instead of individuals, each shelter or school has a username for exchanging information. That’s why everyone is so obedient. It’s like having only one person with a phone on a running train: everyone is desperate to get a view of the outside world by peering over a stranger’s shoulder.”

“Ruler” really was an apt term.

That one account directly influenced the decision-making of dozens or even hundreds of people.

The hoodie bikini girl spoke in a somewhat muffled voice as she embraced and buried her face in the fluffy Bunny Grey costume.

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Having the approval of the ruler who controls the Sphere might be something like a TV key station securing a regional station to expand their broadcast area. That lets them directly influence the local opinion, and gathering together stations would lead to influence outside their individual areas.”

“Why does that remind me of the environment surrounding that right hand?”

“…”

And they had one special privilege allowing them to break free of that situation.

This shelter's leader had given them that stick-like device that looked like USB memory.

Rabbit-Ear Antennae Fran and Costumed Kamijou approached the Sphere which was opened like a lotus flower. To reiterate, the Sphere mostly just received transmissions and its ability to send them was limited. The swimsuit boys and girls were at the 20-30 meter line where the information was displayed, so none of them were approaching the Sphere itself. They must have had no way to use it besides posting their names on the disaster message board, so no one was focused on those two.

Fran pulled the key from her hoodie's pocket and checked around on the Sphere. Each of the opened flower petals seemed to be a control booth, but a closer inspection showed a small slot.

After inserting the device like an insect entering a flower in search of nectar, the stubborn screen changed. It looked like a normal computer's normal browser, but that was enough to make Kamijou tremble. He felt like he was touching a piece of a lost civilization. It was a world of difference from jumping from building to building in search of water in that 55 degree hell.

Faced with the virtual keyboard on the monitor inside the lotus flower, Fran took over with her fingertips sticking out of her baggy sleeves. This was simply because Kamijou could not control it with his costume's mitten-like hands.

They wanted to know the details about their wanted status.

They received an answer just by typing in their names.

"The heat wave was caused by largescale microwaves sent down from satellite orbit and this has been proven by investigation of the damage to electronics. The space station is owned by Karasuma Fran. She maintains control and can resume the heat wave at any time. Use caution around her."

Kamijou held his head in his hands.

None of it was inaccurate. It was true that Fran had been ordered by Kamisato to bring down the city's functions with microwaves, but that lacked some crucial information. Namely, why Fran had done it. This failed to mention how it had restrained the Elements and prevented Academy City from sinking into a sea of blood.

"Since the heat wave and Elements are thought to be closely related due to beginning at around the same time, we cannot overlook any accomplices assisting

Karasuma Fran's escape. That means Kamijou Touma. Both of them are presumed to be deeply connected to all of this. Both disasters have entered a lull, but since there is a danger of them eventually resuming, we have decided to capture those two individuals to prevent that possibility."

On top of that, any inconvenient information was sidestepped. While there was a connection between the heat wave and Elements, Kihara Yuiitsu had been behind the Elements, not Fran. This malicious disinformation had no complete lies, so it had an odd credibility that made it so much harder to dispute.

And that information told them a few things.

"Those Useful Spider people couldn't gather this information on their own," pointed out Kamijou. "They might be able to discover that microwaves were behind the heat wave, but how could they realize you owned the space station when you aren't even a resident of Academy City? And the only people who know we're on the run together are the girls from the former Kamisato Faction who were underneath the Windowless Building with me."

"Ellen's group must control the key to one of the Spheres. They're releasing information convenient to themselves to use the city's people and Useful Spider to isolate us."

Someone might have questioned it under normal circumstances. Was that information really accurate and where had it come from? But the phones and internet were not functioning. They could only receive the information coming in, so they could not argue with it or check over it. And when everyone was gathered together, group psychology set in much more easily. Even if the seeds of doubt entered someone's mind, those seeds would never sprout after seeing everyone else agreeing with it. Then the seeds would be swept away.

And that could lead to losing control like with the attack on the ruler before.

"This is no joke. Are they using SNS information warfare at such an unstable time?"

"But if we let them continue their attacks, the false information will build up like in a puzzle game. If we don't do anything, we'll be in trouble."

That said, they could not stay in the shelter. They had triggered an explosion to save the ruler, so the former Kamisato Faction's fighter girls would eventually arrive to investigate.

They knew the problem, but they could not work to solve it. They would have to

leave without doing anything. With her antenna-covered backpack on, Fran prepared to pull out the stick-shaped key, but then Kamijou's costume hand stopped her.

"…"

"What is it?"

"We can communicate between shelters with this. With this normal browser, we might be able to send detailed instructions in an email instead of that disaster message board." Kamijou chose his words carefully. "That means we can reach Index or Misaka. We're trying to save Kamisato. We can run around if we need to, but it's meaningless if we aren't making preparations of our own. …It's easy enough to say we'll save him, but we don't have any actual clues. I want the help of a specialist, whether it's in magic or science."

They needed to make a comeback from World Rejecter which could slay even Magic Gods. That was no easy feat. He wanted the help of Index with her 103,000 grimoires and Othinus, a legit Magic God.

But Rabbit-Ear Antennae Fran did not like the idea.

"Only the shelter's ruler has these special privileges. It wouldn't be easy sending a message to a specific person."

"You don't need to worry about that with my school. I don't know if it's the Jumpy Bunny or Akikawa Mie, but I know the leader there. If I send them a message, they'll pass it right on to Index or Othinus. …Assuming their shelter hasn't been caught in the same kind of chaos as here."

"Either way, we can't stay here for long. As I said, their fighters will be coming. We can't wait for a response."

"～～～～"

He felt impatient.

They could not afford to wait even a second longer than necessary, but he had to stop to think so he would not waste any time. Should they continue on or move back? They would be surrounded by 100 strange and bizarre people at this rate. One wrong step and it would all fall apart.

The Bunny Grey thought, worried, and agonized over it before speaking.

"I'm still doing it!! If I leave this until later because of a more immediate problem,

I'll never get around to doing it. We have to stay focused on Kamisato!!"

Part 8

To Index and Othinus. The World Rejecter issue took a turn for the worse. I want your knowledge. Let's meet at the District 7 station plaza at twelve noon. Oh, and it's a long story, but I'm being chased by 100 girls right now. It's a dangerous situation, so if things look too bad, give up and escape to safety.

"!!"

"You bitch! You run into me and you aren't even going to apologize!?"

Some people continued walking even as they parted the crowd and ran into people.

After learning there had been an explosion at the Trial shelter, Elza with her bottle of 10 yen coins and pirate girl Luca with her black rose eyepatch arrived at the large park in District 7. They looked around, saw a crowd by the lake where the explosion seemed to have happened, and sighed.

"Looks like it wasn't the Elements."

"Let's check over there too."

The eyepatch girl wore a large pirate hat with a feather in it and a thick sailor's coat. She wore a blue bikini below that and did not hesitate to speak. She swept back her curly blonde hair which fell to her shoulder blades and continued walking.

Then someone grabbed Elza's shoulder from behind.

"What the hell is wrong with you!? I'm talking to you here!"

"＿＿＿＿"

The girl with roughly cut hair silently narrowed her eyes to physically teach this guy what was "wrong with" her, but then someone cut in from the side.

“Uuh, sob.”

A girl of about 10 wearing baggy clothing began wailing like a siren.

No, this was supposedly the previous girl in the eyepatch and pirate hat.

“Ubweeehhh!! Someone…shomeone help me! Thish weirdo is trying to take me away!!”

“Eh? Wait! No!”

As the strange boy panicked, he was surrounded by gazes that had cooled to absolute zero. As the overly energetic ape was grabbed on both sides and dragged away like a picture of a little grey being captured, Pirate Girl Luca stuck her little tongue out at him.

Elza watched as Luca’s body type changed from elementary school aged to high school aged.

Shapely curves filled out the bikini worn below her naval coat.

“That was cruel. You didn’t have to play the weak little girl card.”

“We don’t have time to deal with single-digit IQs. Let’s get going.”

Kamijou Touma and Fran at least knew that the heat wave and Element problems were gone. That meant they had no reason to be fixated on food, water, or weapons. If they had still visited a shelter, it had to be information they craved.

The two girls hurried toward the Sphere that Useful Spider had distributed to each shelter.

The former Kamisato Faction seemed powerful thanks to its 100 girls with various powers and abilities, but they were playing an away game in Academy City. Kamijou Touma had his own world, so if he had the option of contacting and gathering his friends, it was unknown who would have the greater numbers. It was unrealistic to think someone would have 100 friends willing to risk their lives at a moment’s notice, but the possibility was still there. Or perhaps it was the isolated “away game” feeling that made them think that way.

“Whatever the case, it’s all over for Kamijou and Fran if they’re carelessly relying on the Sphere here,” spat out Elza. “I hate this. I hate it so much, so let’s get it over with. For the boss’s sake.”

“Yes, before Yuiitsu uses a hammer to smash that right hand that’s binding us to

her. …We only have to pretend to obey her. As long as we have that right hand… as long as we have World Rejecter, it might be possible to drag Kamisato-kun back.”

If Akikawa or the Jumpy Bunny receives this, please pass it on to Index and Othinus. We’re fine. But as I said, we’re being pursued by some dangerous people. I think Akikawa knows about Salome. This is going to be an entire crowd of people on her level, so don’t get involved. I can’t protect everyone right now.

And the pursuers arrived at the Sphere.

They first observed the donut-shaped crowd and then approached the lotus-shaped Sphere itself which required administrative privileges to use. They searched everything.

Finally, they sighed.

Eyepatch Pirate Girl Luca expressed her irritation by tapping her fingers on the hilt of the cutlass at her hip.

“Target not found.”

“Damn, all this for nothing. Had they already finished and moved on!?”

Part 9

Only 10 meters away from that donut-shaped crowd, Kamijou wore the Bunny Grey costume and embraced the hoodie bikini girl with his curled up back facing the girls.

His heart pounded irregularly in his chest.

They might not recognize Kamijou in his costume, but they would recognize Fran right away. This plan was just like with the Elements. Even if there was only a thin layer of paper between them, they could escape even the most formidable enemy as long as they were not found.

“Slowly. We need to slowly move away, Fran.”

“Nn.”

Fran nodded while wearing her antenna-covered backpack and burying her face in the thick fabric of the Bunny Grey. Meanwhile, the Sphere was active. Even now, it was sending the message to the school Kamijou had stayed at.

They did not actually need to stay with it.

Fran had been communicating with a space station in satellite orbit to emit the microwaves for the heat wave, so she had high-power communications equipment. After using the stick-shaped key to rewrite the Sphere’s privileges, she had established a link with her backpack’s equipment so she could continue sending data via the Sphere.

They had no reason to stay there.

They held onto each other as they left the crowd. Once they reached a certain point, they sprang up and took off running away from the park.

“The message was sent. Next we meet up with Index and Othinus!”

They knew the time, they had set a location, and civilization had recovered enough for a meetup.

The time for the heat wave and Elements was over. From here on, the humans were in control.

Between the Lines 1

This may have been what it meant to be beaten to a pulp.

Kamisato Kakeru was so thoroughly injured that he could not even get up under his own power. Magic God Niang-Niang, a sickly pale girl in a mini China dress with baggy sleeves, put her hands on her hips and haughtily looked down at him.

“Well, that should be enough playing around.”

“…”

The pain and bleeding were real. Apparently, he was not just going to be eternally tortured after falling into the abyss. Even in this world, he could die. That should not have been surprising, but Kamisato felt oddly certain of it now.

“C’mon, don’t give me that look. You’re the one that picked a fight with us. We were just taking you up on the offer now that we had the chance. Besides, if we really wanted you dead, you would’ve been blown to smithereens with the very first hit, right? We are the great Magic Gods, after all.”

Niang-Niang kept talking as she sat on a piece of metal sitting on the roadside. Kamisato could barely move as he lay on the ground, but he finally realized that was wreckage of the device known as the A.A.A.

“And we don’t actually have that much of a grudge against you.”

“Cough, cough. You can say that after everything you just did?”

“I never said there wasn’t any grudge at all.” Niang-Niang crossed her slender legs in a risqué fashion. “I mean, we’re the group that wanted to relax without causing any trouble for the world. In that sense, being sent to an isolated world with no one to cause trouble for no matter what wasn’t a bad option. It might even be worth thanking you. Right, Nephthys?”

“…?”

That name confused Kamisato. But before he could gather his thoughts, Niang-Niang was answered by a silver-haired woman with her brown skin wrapped in bandages.

“That’s right. It wouldn’t have been my 1st choice, but it feels like settling for a 2nd or 3rd choice. It’s unfortunate the High Priest and Zombie aren’t here, but that’s about the only real complaint. We just wanted to tease you a little for not showing us the respect we deserve as gods.”

“Heh heh. We gave you a personal sparring session with the gods, so you should really be tearfully thanking us. This wasn’t true divine punishment. Didn’t I say we were just playing around?”

But Kamisato could not speak properly.

He forced out the name in bits and pieces.

“Neph…thys…?”

“Yes?”

“But…you…?”

He trailed off when it hit him.

He found the answer in the fact that the golden retriever was not here but the A.A.A. weapon was.

The 90% that had been torn away at the same time as Niang-Niang was separate from the 10% that had become Patricia Birdway’s body to save her. This was the 90% that had disappeared before making that choice. This was the arrogant and insolent god of magic.

And those two were not alone.

There were Magic Gods everywhere. On a rooftop, Proserpina wore her Western mourning clothes and hid her face behind a veil. Below a car, one-armed Nuada had tattoos covering his bare upper body. There was also a shadow at the entrance to an alley, countless eyes peering out at him from all of the holes on a manhole cover, and so on. Kamisato could not even tell if they were all real, or if his senses were malfunctioning from the powerful presence of the Magic Gods.

“Can I get down to business?” asked Niang-Niang. “We are perfectly willing to accept our situation here. We’ve even decided to accept this as a holy ground offered to us by human hands. But in that case, Kamisato Kakeru, your presence here is honestly concerning. We were just settling in here, but now it turns out we were only in the eye of the storm. It might only be our 2nd choice, but we had already found where we fit in here. …So we don’t want that overturned. That leaves two options for you.”

Two fingers that could transform into any weapon poked out of her baggy sleeve.

This Magic God was making it clear that, if she felt like it, she would instantly slice through Kamisato’s neck or torso.

“Either you leave or you die here. Choose one.”

“…”

“Which would you prefer?” Niang-Niang sounded cheerful. “Thou hast disturbed our slumber. To restore our peace, shall the gods lend thee a helping hand?”

Chapter 2: Or Escape Provides a Counterattack – Social_Network_Slayer.

Part 1

When they left the park, Kamijou took off the Bunny Grey costume. He was only allowed that getup in the park where the Kigurumi Rock Fes was being held. It would be too conspicuous elsewhere, making it entirely meaningless.

“Uuh… Bunny Grey is all limp…”

When Hoodie Bikini Fran saw the empty shell of the body and the disembodied head, she pouted her lips in an amusing way.

“What is that creepy cute thing with weird eyes anyway?”

“Nn!”

“Ow! Don’t kick me!!”

“Bunny Grey is a mischievous alien who landed after mistaking Stonehenge for a landing sign crop circle left by one of their investigators. There he gets the help of Know-It-All John and Precocious Mary to discover the secrets of Loch Ness, get preserved in formaldehyde at the British Museum, and have other adventures.”

“Oh, yeah. There was a foreign CG cartoon about that, wasn’t there? The characters moved too smoothly, so people thought their expressions were actually creep-…gwah!?”

“Bunny Grey is not a mere work of fiction! He is a spectacle based in actual history! He is an honorary citizen of London, so there’s no doubting it!!”

“Hey…I think you were going for a punch to the solar plexus there, but you had your eyes squeezed shut and you need to accept that your fist landed a little lower than that…”

Kamijou borrowed a green down coat for staff members that was probably meant

to be worn over a stage outfit to protect performers from the cold while not out on stage (why they would be needed at a kigurumi festival was a bit of a mystery, though), so he put it on over his swimsuit and completed his escape with Rabbit-Ear Antennae Fran. It almost reached his knees, so it made him feel like a Hollywood villain who liked lounging in a gown at a luxury hotel or like a flasher on the street corner.

“Let’s borrow some shoes while we’re at it. Here’s a pair for you, Fran.”

When they left the park and returned to the streets, they could see some people here and there. The heat wave and Elements were supposedly gone, so these may have been people heading into the dangerous “outside” to see if it was true.

It looked strange, but there were a lot of girls with a down jacket worn over their racing swimsuit like a life jacket or with a blanket wrapped around their bikini. The strange combination of winter clothing and swimsuits was something like a platypus that had stopped its evolution halfway through. They wanted to reach the next age, but they were afraid to abandon the previous age. That mindset was visible in their clothing.

Kamijou and Fran were wanted. Their hoodie + bikini and swim trunks + down coat did not stand out all that much, but someone might recognize them if they stayed in one place too long. They made sure to keep moving.

“That twelve o’clock meetup time is a long time from now.”

“Well, excuse me, but I bet they need to make their own preparations,” spat back Kamijou. “And there’s something we need to check on while we wait, right?”

“?”

“The SNS information warfare.”

Part 2

“Hm, hm, hm, hmm…”

District 5 was a neighbor to District 7. It had more college students than middle or high school students and its largest shelter was named Academy. That shelter was located in a college building turned into a fortress by barricades. Various theories

were pinned anonymously to the bulletin board in the center and the one chosen as the best would determine their use of water and other resources.

At first glance, it might sound free and equal, but it really came down to majority rule. Just like there was a trick to writing a postcard more likely to be chosen for a contest prize, the people who knew how to write in a pretentious way had an overwhelming advantage, so a few people were effectively winning every time, whether their theories were accurate or not.

That made it easy to hijack.

The truth of the heat wave. The high-power microwaves sent from Fran's unregistered space station.

No theory could have been more sensational.

That shelter's Sphere had become the former Kamisato Faction's key station. How far they expanded their influence from there would determine how easily they could move through Academy City.

"Done. That should be a good enough multi-stage attack. I intentionally get them all emotional, fall silent so they'll start arguing back about the wrong thing, and… got them! Argument won!! Gwa ha ha ha! It's too late now to take back what you posted. And I've already predicted all the insults you can throw at me, so they don't scare me!!"

The person playing with the master key to the shelter's Sphere was Maya, the one known as a ghost girl. The tall girl with long black hair was hunched forward and wore pure white burial clothes, but she would occasionally fade in or out. She almost looked like an image projected in the fog, but that was not quite accurate.

Plasma, cognitive disorders, and magnetic abnormalities. There were a number of theories whispered about a scientific explanation of ghosts, but one of those was extremely low frequency waves outside of the audible range. When people were exposed for long periods of time to a stimulus they could not process with their five senses, they would be unable to relax and ultimately see or hear imaginary sights or sounds. Ghosts were often seen in abandoned houses or caves because they tended to have drafts and creaking floors.

Maya generally appeared below Censers, drones shaped like crane flies that emitted imperceptible low frequency waves and aromas. Those were the things flying around her while emitting pale phosphorescence like will-o'-the-wisps. In truth, Fran's microwave attack had been a real danger for her. She might have been lost there if the shielding had been too weak.

In truth, Maya did not know what a ghost…no, what a soul really was.

She pictured it as something like a smell. If she could rub the smell of her life onto something else before it faded with time, she could live on. But if she could not produce the original smell, she would have to continue protecting this one. Once it disappeared, that was the end.

The girl felt she was not that different from the core in an Element's chest. And she did not mind. As long as she could do something for Kamisato Kakeru, anyway.

"To think a ghost would be focused on stealth marketing online."

That comment came from the overly-enthusiastic cosplayer girl named Olivia. She was currently dressed as the original Magical Powered Kanamin. She believed the original series was the best. As her outfit suggested, the girl with her short brown hair in twintails was the subculture type, so she got along fairly well with internet-obsessed Maya.

The gloomy tall girl shook her head which was adorned by a triangular headdress with a slight cut that made it look somewhat like a heart.

"What are you talking about? There are plenty of urban legends about ghosts who don't realize they're dead and continue trolling message boards. Haven't you heard that people sensitive to spirits can tell which posts are made by ghosts?"

"No, I haven't. And what does it even mean to be sensitive to spirits? I don't know where this all got started, but it was clearly TV shows that spread it around. Just like Valentine's Day was used by the chocolate companies, I bet its original meaning was entirely lost."

The cosplay girl spun around her magic wand that looked too heavy to be plastic and she embraced Maya's neck from behind. The ghost girl was translucent and fading in and out, but the way she was supported by imperceptible sound and smell gave her skin what seemed to be a tangible texture.

Maya continued checking over the Sphere that had been left for communication during a disaster. It was designed to send out preset messages at a specific time or at a set interval, but it was a convenient toy once she adjusted that a little.

A program that mechanically made posts while pretending to be a human being's account was known as a bot.

"Won't they notice what you're doing?"

“Normally they would eventually notice it’s a posting pattern using a flowchart with some randomization thrown in, but not everyone can use the terminals equally right now. Each shelter has a single Sphere. When everyone has to view the information from the same angle, like a movie screen or roadside TV, it’s easier for them to slip into group psychology. An individual’s small doubts will be swept away by the whole.”

Olivia smelled cinnamon.

A cup of milk tea topped with white foam sat next to the ghost girl who had the cleavage of her large chest seductively exposed. She giggled while enjoying the powdered spice she sprinkled on top of the foam. Tea had become popular during the heat wave when they had needed to boil all of their precious drinking water, but this was overly decorated.

“And I can also make more obvious bots for the other side to make people hate them. It’s all in how you decide to play it. Yes, I could make it look like Fran sent them out to stir up the people while she flees.”

Maya grabbed a colorful vegetable stick she had gotten from somewhere and rested her head in the cosplay girl’s chest.

Olivia looked exasperated.

“Do you really have to eat when you don’t have a body?”

“What are you talking about? Even ghosts are given food offerings.”

“But only the vegetables with the dipping sauce shoved off to the side?”

“Please don’t joke about this. How am I supposed to eat that mass of artificial ingredients? I try to look after my nutritional balance, you know? Not everything is okay just because it’s a vegetable.”

Maya whistled as she touched the Sphere’s screen with her fingertips to make some minor adjustments.

“Let’s see. Will the little bots go along with what I said? I just hope I’ve made Fran into the villain while also letting people know that everyone is scared and they’re not the only ones that want to go nuts. This is only a temporary broadcast network using the shelter rulers who agree with me as regional stations, so I hope they fall behind me on this one.”

“Aren’t you getting a lot of posts arguing with you?”

“Of course. Now, is this coming from the sensible adults, or is it a panicked Fran or her friends trying to change the subject? Let’s try narrowing it down.”

“How?”

“The way people say things online tends to be pretty identifiable. Attacks pretending to be from a corporate address while targeting a specific person aren’t that unusual these days and the patterns have been analyzed to the point of creating a system out of it.”

Without even turning around, Maya passed a white radish stick back over her shoulder, so the cosplay girl accepted it in her mouth and drove the conversation further.

“More importantly, where am I supposed to go and what am I supposed to destroy? That’s all I need to know.”

“Well, Fran’s group has probably noticed the Spheres by now and will start contacting them, so I might be able to detect her when she bites a little too hard at the bait I posted for her. But…”

“But?”

“Olivia, have you already been dyed in Kihara Yuiitsu’s colors? Are you not questioning this anymore?”

The cosplay girl answered while embracing the ghost girl from behind and rubbing her own cheek against the realistic softness of Maya’s cheek.

“I want to focus on something and I don’t really care what. If I’m not doing something that seems useful, I think I’ll go crazy.”

“…”

“We can’t let Fran mess this up. Kamisato Kakeru’s fate is in our hands. I don’t know what that girl is trying to do, but the right hand ‘gate’ is connected to Kihara Yuiitsu. I don’t see how we can improve this situation without that.”

People who feared ghosts or curses would make sure their door was locked, sprinkle salt around, and paste charms around far more than necessary. It was all a defensive means of ensuring their peace of mind, but when someone had every wall entirely covered in charms, would people see that as someone protecting themselves from an oddity or would they see the action itself as the oddity? It was hard to say.

Maya also wanted to preserve the current situation, so she would fulfill the role given to her.

“Oh, found her☆”

“?”

“She must have gotten sick of all the misinformation because she argued back with information only she could know. I thought Fran would have more patience than that. If we check the Sphere that honest little girl was using, we might find some useful hints.”

Part 3

It was just before noon and Hoodie Bikini Fran was viewing a card-sized screen connected to her backpack by a spiraling cord like that of a home phone, but then she slapped her own forehead.

“…Now I’ve done it.”

“Wait, what happened? Please tell me!!”

Kamijou grabbed her slender shoulders and shook her back and forth, but the rabbit-ear antennae girl refused to look him in the eye.

“I know two things. They already had a multi-stage scenario set up, so no matter how much I fight back, they’ll crush it all with their flowchart. And I’d rather not get into the details, but they identified me even though I was posting anonymously. This is really bad.”

“Umm, so you mean…since you weren’t directly using the Sphere…and since you were accessing it through your backpack’s equipment…”

“You don’t have to delay getting to the point.” Fran admitted her mistake and puffed out her cheeks. “It’s true they can’t locate us just by determining which Sphere I was using as a relay machine. Think of it like a key station and the mobile broadcast truck sent to the scene. We won’t be caught in a crossfire from 100 different warriors.”

“Phew.”

“But…um…this is really hard to say, but if they physically destroy the Sphere that’s like the key station, then the broadcast truck’s signal can never get back into the network. And more importantly, they might analyze the data left in the Sphere’s temporary cache…So I think they’ll probably steal all the messages we’ve sent or received. I’m sorry!!”

“Wait, what was that you said really quiet and really fast just now? Say it properly this time!!”

The situation was a tricky one.

If the enemy knew the time and location of the meetup, the risk of an ambush increased dramatically. That would put them, as well as Index and Othinus, in danger.

But the designated time was coming up soon. It hurt being forced from the network after their key station Sphere was stolen, but there was a chance the enemy would not manage to extract the message in time. If they went straight to the designated location and found Index and Othinus, they might be able to leave before the former Kamisato Faction even showed up.

“I guess we’ll have to bet on that for now…”

“…”

“Now you owe me one.”

“You’ve barely done anything!!”

“How many times do you think I’ve pushed your unathletic ass onto or over something!? There was the subway platform and the ticket gate at least!!”

“～～～～!!”

The great Fran actually blushed for once as she squeezed her eyes shut and swung her tool knife around wildly, so Kamijou had to seriously roll out of the way while all his hair bristled. He finally tried to hold her arms in place, but the giant backpack got in the way. After some more struggling, he swept her feet out from under her, climbed on top of her, and tried to pin her wrists to the ground, but the backpack got in the way again. She was a lot like someone lying on a balance ball. The arch of her back caused some trouble in how it pushed out her modest chest and thrust forward the base of her thighs protected by the bottom of her hoodie. Kamijou looked exactly like a trench coat pervert pushing a small girl down on a tiny table to have his way with her.

“Calm down, you delusional girl! Giving an idiot a blade is like poison for the

brain! Find a better way to use your head!!”

“I’m not delusional! I really did have a chip implanted in my neck!!!!!!”

“Stop! This is no time to force your claim with a knife!!”

Trench Coat Pervert Kamijou Touma protected the peace by restraining the hoodie bikini girl instead of strapping her to a bed. She tried to struggle and throw off the pervert on top of her, but with her arms and legs restrained, she ended up just wiggling her stomach up and down in an alluring wave motion. But Fran either finally realized it was useless or noticed her bikini’s knots were truly at their limit because she stopped struggling.

The die had been cast.

The situation was underway, so they could not turn things back no matter how much they wanted to. They could only choose the best option still available to them.

Their Sphere had been stolen, but Fran’s backpack full of electronics would still be useful. That equipment included a digital clock as if it were a bonus prize.

It was almost twelve noon.

They would have to try meeting up with Index and Othinus in the District 7 station plaza.

Part 4

“I’m starting to feel hungry.”

Those words alone may not have seemed out of the ordinary.

But everyone there froze in place.

The words of Tyrant held a lot of weight. They had no idea what kind of orders they would be given. Cultures around the world had legends of food made from brains and the girls could not disobey her if she started wondering what that tasted like.

She was Kihara Yuiitsu, master of the right hand.

But the woman with the qualities needed to possess World Rejecter looked entirely relaxed.

“There’s a shelter near here, isn’t there? And one of you controls it, right?”

“Y-yes…”

That scratchy answer came from Salome who continued obeying without ever having her missing arm healed.

“That would be Charity where Siren is assisting Maya.”

“Eh heh. That name sounds interesting. Then let’s go get something there. If you want to eat with me, then follow this finger.”

Kihara Yuiitsu raised her sewn-on right hand’s index finger and spun it around as she readily walked out of the space below the Windowless Building.

Even the smallest bit of trouble out there, from an attack by thugs to choking on a rice cake, would mean losing that right hand’s power.

The raincoat mass murderer and the others quickly followed her out like servants and Cruel Queen Kihara Yuiitsu climbed the long slope.

“I feel like eating barbecue.”

“…”

“Lamb meat would be nice. It can taste a little odd, but that makes it surprising and interesting. But, but. There need to be plenty of vegetables on the skewers as well. Maybe an overall ratio of 6:4…no, 7:3.”

“……
……”

No one could give a proper response.

There’s no meat? Then can’t one of you lie down on the chopping block? They never knew when that lunatic would say something like that.

They walked through District 7 and to the nearby shelter which was located inside a resort hotel.

“It isn’t often they can focus on all three necessities: food, shelter, and clothing. You said it was called Charity?”

“Kh.”

“Please, relax. So what kind of rules does this place use?”

“Um, I believe the amount of charity you give to others determines your influence.”

The raincoat girl’s usual energy was nowhere to be found. After she hesitantly and slowly answered, Yuiitsu laughed in her lab coat and bikini.

“I see. And that means receiving help from others reduces your status, *so it comes down to keeping a low profile and avoiding other people’s kindness.* Hmm, how twisted☆”

It was midday. A large industrial pot had apparently been brought from the kitchen and it had been used to cook over a fire out front. Two young men were carrying it and Yuiitsu tilted her head when she approached them.

“What a creamy smell. Is that a white stew?”

That casual comment sent a chill running through Salome’s entire body.

No, it was not the words. It was the glitter of curiosity in the woman’s eyes.

“Sizzle☆”

It happened suddenly.

Kihara Yuiitsu did not even hesitate to shove her right hand into the boiling pot, so Salome had to quickly stop her. World Rejecter was the fundamental gate needed to rescue Kamisato Kakeru, so they could not let it be boiled away here. And Yuiitsu of course knew that. Her eyes were narrowed in delight.

“Ah!”

Rushing forward so quickly to stop her had backfired and the raincoat girl lost her balance. Her hips collided with the pot held by the shocked men and it fell to the ground with her.

The contents were dumped on the roundabout and on the mass murderer who rolled around as scorching pain pierced her entire body. Yuiitsu then stepped on the girl’s head while humming cheerfully. Pinned to the ground and unable to

even struggle, the soaked girl clenched her teeth to swallow a scream.

“Ghhhhhh…!?”

“Hm, hm, hm, hmmm. Stay just like that. Yes, just a while longer like that.”

The shoe rubbed at her head in accordance with a mysterious sense of aesthetics, so the girl could not even raise her head. That was why Salome first sensed the disaster with her ears rather than eyes with her body and cheeks stained with the slimy liquid.

“What, what?”

“Who even are they? Outsiders?”

“But the food! Why are they playing around with it!?”

The men, women, boys and girls of Charity noticed and approached the commotion, but the look in their eyes changed when they saw the raincoat girl lying in the pool of food splattered on the ground.

The demon spoke with a childish smile on her face.

“Ohhh? It stank so bad I assumed it was a leftover failure. But, but. Seeing it soaking such a cute girl’s body is sure to bring a smile to your faces no matter how it tastes, right? Isn’t that how disgusting people like you work?”

“You can go straight to hellllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllll!!”

Yuiitsu whispered a suggestion to the brown girl under her foot.

“Now, Miss Guard Dog, are you ready? Puppy dog, if you don’t do everything you can to protect me here, World Rejecter might be torn right from my arm. You might lose the tiny thread you need to save your beloved Onii-chan.”

“…!!!???”

“Here, I’ll let go of your leash. 3, 2, 1, go!!”

After that joking countdown, the weight left Salome’s head in the pool of white stew.

(Goddammit…)

“Goddammit!!!!!”

The group all had handmade weapons probably meant for the Elements, but the raincoat girl still charged into the center of the group.

Countless hands surrounded the brave girl like a giant anemone. If even one of them grabbed the bottom of the raincoat that was fluttering up as the air caught it, she would be pulled down into the group. Yuiitsu held her sides and laughed on and on as she watched the brown girl fighting as if dancing through a hellish ocean.

The raincoat girl probably still trusted the other girls sharing these circumstances with her.

In fact, she may have even trusted her enemies of Kamijou Touma and Karasuma Fran.

“Oh, this is just wonderful.”

Siren, the girl who had taken the spot of ruler at this shelter, walked over to check out the commotion and went pale. Yuiitsu took a piece of bread from her that had the moisture removed by slicing it thinly and frying it. It was probably meant to be eaten with the white stew, but Yuiitsu tossed it directly into her mouth.

“Munch, munch. Half of Yuiitsu-chan’s orders are just meant to mess with you. For example, asking you to kill Kamijou Touma. But that means *the other half are not just meant to mess with you.* I hope you can keep this up and blossom into some beautiful flowers. Some venomously colorful flowers☆”

Part 5

“Academy City is currently working through the 48 Hours to Restore Order. There is nothing to worry about. However, to ensure the process runs smoothly, please provide information on the following people: 1. Kamijou Touma. 2. Karasuma Fran. They were deeply involved in the so-called ‘heat wave’ that affected Academy City and was also connected to the Elements…”

A helicopter with several steel beams dangling from wires flew by overhead. As soon as Kamijou heard the announcement, he grabbed Fran’s hand and pressed against a nearby withering roadside tree that was half buried in white sand.

But he had not hidden because he was afraid of being spotted by Useful Spider.

“Damn.”

He used the thick trunk rather than the overhead branches to hide and he groaned quietly with the small hoodie bikini girl in his arms.

“We’re 5 minutes early, but the Kamisato Faction is already here.”

He could not recognize and name all 100 of them, but he did recognize the bored-looking girl wandering around the wolf statue in the station plaza which was littered with piles of white sand. She had ankle-length black hair and dragged a lab coat behind her. In a way, that tracer and forensics girl was the most dangerous one. If Ellen spotted them here, they would be back to endlessly trying to lose her.

Fran whispered back while looking entirely unfazed in his arms.

“I see Ellen and Mary near the statue. They stand out, so you know who I’m talking about, right?”

“Yeah,” said Kamijou, sounding not at all pleased.

A sexy girl in a red dress and with splendid blonde ringlet curls was wandering around on all fours just like the wolf statue. She was a complete stranger, but he would have noticed her immediately even in a crowd of a million. She had just stuck her head in an abandoned kebab stand and the other girls had been forced to stop her. The meat had to have gone bad ages ago, but she did not seem to mind.

“Mary is a wolf girl. Not a literal half-wolf, but a girl who was raised by wolves. It’s a good thing we’re downwind. Being raised by wolves shouldn’t have increased her senses, muscles, or digestive system, but she ignores all logic as far as that’s concerned.”

“What? So if she bites you, she’ll break right through the bone?”

“That’s part of the problem.”

He had meant it as a joke, but she did not deny it. A chill ran down his spine.

“But the biggest threat from Mary is her sense of smell. A dog’s is said to be 6000 times more sensitive than a human’s, but hers is even more than that. If she catches our scent, this will become very, very troublesome. Depending on how the winds blow, we might be in trouble just staying here.”

“A forensics expert and now a police dog, huh?”

“We should count ourselves fortunate that Maya isn’t flying around in the sky. … That self-indulgent ghost is probably focused on trolling the message boards.”

Whatever the case, this left them with no way of approaching the plaza.

Then Fran started pointing around some more.

“Those are the only two in the center, but there are more on the outskirts: Luca the pirate and Olivia the cosplayer provide the most firepower. Then there’s Aileen who’s obsessed with ‘modern’ weapons, Sandy the microbe professor, Melon who specializes in assassination weapons, and Amy the predator queen. All of those are from the combat unit. Any one of them would be dangerous and there’s nothing we can do if they surround us.”

“Not one of those introductions sounded very reassuring,” groaned Kamijou.

(But if they sent in their best fighters, why isn’t Salome here? Is she being kept in reserve somewhere?)

Fran looked up at the spiky-haired boy who held her in his arms.

“What are you going to do?”

“We can’t fight our way through them. The safest thing would be to contact Index and Othinus before they enter the plaza if possible.”

But heaven was not going to give Kamijou Touma that kind of lucky break.

It was 2 minutes before the arranged time, but he already saw the white cloth with teacup-like golden embroidery. He just about clicked his tongue, but barely managed to restrain himself. The familiar nun was holding a calico cat in her arms, the Magic God was sitting on her shoulder like a dress-up doll, and they had just set foot inside the station plaza.

They were right on the opposite side of the wolf statue. He could not get her to stop or call quietly out to her now. The former Kamisato Faction would definitely notice.

“(Dammit…)”

He wanted to save Kamisato no matter what, so it would be truly painful to miss this chance to meet up with Index and Othinus.

“Puhah.”

But after pushing with her small hands to finally free herself from Kamijou’s chest, Fran crouched down and began scratching something out on the ground with a rock she found.

“What are you doing?”

“We can’t meet up with them like this. We need to designate a new place to meet up and then leave. We need a clever way of leaving a difficult code only that girl would understand.”

The hoodie bikini girl drew out a few concentric circles like an archery target and added a few vertical and horizontal lines along the edge of the circles. It may have been an alien language used by little greys, but Kamijou saw things differently.

“We came this far. Those Ellen and Mary girls found this place by pulling the data out of the Sphere we were using as a relay key station, so they’ll be watching Index from now on. She can’t escape them if they’re tailing her.”

“Then what do we do?”

Kamijou glanced to the center of the plaza from behind the roadside tree half buried in white sand. Index had arrived ahead of the designated time, so she was probably seriously worried about him. He slowly sighed and made up his mind as he watched her nervously looking around.

“Let’s give up on meeting up with them. Trying to force our way through will turn this plaza into hell on earth. Who knows where a stray bullet could end up.”

“And?”

Needless to say, Kamijou and Fran wanted help. To rescue Kamisato from the new world he had been sent to, they wanted help from an expert with plenty of unique knowledge even for the magic side. If they could not recruit Index or Othinus for that role, what were they to do? Things would only get worse the longer they stayed on the run.

“Fran,” said Kamijou. “You’ve been with Kamisato all this time, so you have to know a lot about his friends.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“We can’t get close to the center, but we might be able to manage with someone on the outer edge.”

Kamijou cast the die while watching the deadly besiegement from the outside.

“We’ll take our expert from the Kamisato Faction. Fran, point out someone who knows a lot about the magic side.”

Part 6

The station plaza was not an entirely open space. As previously stated, there were variously sized piles of white sand thought to be the remains of the Elements. The taller ones were twice Kamijou’s height, so it was possible to hide behind them. There were also trees, vending machines, and benches.

Even so, each step closer was no easy task. If anyone caught a glimpse of them, it would mean trouble with more than just that one person. She would raise her voice to call everyone over to surround Kamijou and Fran.

And that was why they chose this plan.

As Kamijou held his breath and crouched behind a pile of white sand, he watched the eyepatch pirate girl named Luca walk the same course a few times before he forcefully covered her mouth from behind.

He just had to make sure she could not call over the others after discovering him.

He wrapped his other arm around the girl’s slender body and dragged her back while unbalancing her body weight. The tall pile of sand created a blind spot that hid them from the plaza.

“～～～～!!”

The girl wore a large pirate hat with a feather in it and a thick navy blue coat that a sailor would wear. Her curly blonde hair fell down to her shoulder blades and an eyepatch covered one of her blue eyes. The blue bikini below the coat was bright enough to nearly imbalance her overall impression.

Whether it was a strategic move or an act of instinctive fear, Luca used her covered mouth to bite at Kamijou’s hand. He could not hold on.

And as soon as his grip loosened, he lost sight of her.

No, she had suddenly shrunk in height. Bizarrely, the girl of about 15 aged down to about 10. That made it seem like she had crouched down to escape.

“Why you…!”

When the pirate girl tried to escape, he tackled her at the waist and dragged her down to the ground. As soon as his right hand touched her, her unnatural age returned to normal. Her clothing could not keep up with the sudden size changes, so her swimsuit and coat started to shift out of place. Even so, the girl twisted her body around to slip out from under Kamijou. She was as slippery as an eel or a wet bar of soap. She flipped up her coat, tried to roll out of the way, and glared up at him.

“Bhah!! How reckless do you have to be to charge right into our group when-…”

Then the white sandy girl noticed something. Her companions would come running if she called for them, but she trailed off. Kamijou Touma held a blade too large to call a knife. It was longer than two 30cm rulers. Needless to say, it was the cutlass the pirate girl had worn at her hip. Yes, Kamijou had not just been trying to stop her when he tackled her at the hip. He had been going for the buckle of the thick belt that held the sword.

“Kh.”

The pirate also wore a large pirate-y musket on her back, but the gun required the powder and bullet to be loaded through the muzzle and was ill-suited for quick use. Plus, the long narrow ramrod used to load it was held in the same scabbard as the cutlass. There was nothing she could do with that taken from her.

Eyepatch Luca waited to see what would happen next with her back to the pile of white sand.

“That is enough talking out there. Get in here already.”

“Wha-? Eh?”

She heard a voice behind her and slender arms reached under her arms and around her body. Fran was the one grabbing her, but that meant she had to have been hiding behind Luca. And yet there had only been the wall of white sand there.

A boy with a sword stood in front of her and Fran held her from behind as if to smell her blonde hair. Luca could no longer resist physically or mentally, so she was easily dragged away.

Where to?

Into a small igloo-like space presumably dug inside the pile of white sand.

“It’s a pretty good hiding place, isn’t it? When it’s all white, the distance and angles are hard to make out. Overseas they’ve apparently had fun making videos in salt lakes to mess with the sense of perspective. Plus, the fine white sand absorbs the particles that produce smells. It might be like activated charcoal. We noticed it while watching that Mary girl. We were hiding downwind and there was a kebab stand in the plaza, but we couldn’t smell the rotting meat at all. So you can’t rely on her nose right now.”

“But this…this is all a makeshift measure…”

“Yeah, it could all fall apart at any time, so don’t struggle, Luca. There’s no saving us if we’re buried alive under this.”

Their conversation could not be heard outside with these thick sand walls around them.

Kamijou actually thought the granules had to be quite heavy to not be blown away by the midwinter wind, so it would be stable. But he was not obligated to tell that to the pirate girl who could start struggling at any time.

Luca clenched her teeth and Fran moved away from her back.

Of course, Fran also made sure to confiscate the belt holding the pirate girl’s musket on her back. In addition to the gun itself, the skull-shaped container holding the black gunpowder was attached to that belt, so she could not use it like a firecracker.

Kamijou gave an exasperated look at the cutlass he held.

“H-hey, Fran. A sword and a gun? Are you sure she’s the right one? We need someone with magical knowledge rivalling Index’s. Are you sure we aren’t recruiting the wrong person?”

“This is the right person. Luca uses a special form of combat linked to the Voodoo found in the Caribbean where pirates once ruled. To perform a great variety of ceremonies on the limited space of a ship, she is a magician who follows Legba Atibon, the god of the gate who manages all ceremonies. Legba Atibon indirectly appears in all Voodoo ceremonies, so he does not just exist on a specific ceremonial day and he is defined as existing at all times. Luca has used this to achieve control of subjective time, allowing her to freely change the age of her

external appearance and to prepare magic that would normally be a once-in-a-decade event in only a second."

"Control of time…?"

"Not only can she approach Kamisato-chan as an older or younger sister, but when the rest of us are suffering from that time of month, this demon of a magician can skip right past it."

"This conversation got vulgar fast!"

That would be why she had shrunk and grown when he tried to capture her.

But Kamijou had to frown.

Kamisato had said some confusing things when talking about World Rejecter. Instead of sending someone to an entirely different world, it sent them to another "world" in the same timeline or to the excess space in the same film.

Luca was caught in a space too small to stand up without hitting her head, her weapons had been taken from her, she was surrounded by enemies, and she believed struggling would get her buried alive. The pirate girl gave Kamijou an irritated look, but she seemed unable to come up with anything to do about it.

She calmly raised both hands.

"What do you want? I will protect Kamisato-kun. And to do that, I'm willing to endure the humiliation from Kihara Yuiitsu who possesses the right hand we need as a gate. Nothing you can say will shake my conviction!"

"…"

"Killing me won't change the order to execute you. Surely you know that the line from Kihara Yuiitsu is one-way and she doesn't listen to anything we say."

"That's not what we're asking of you." Kamijou hesitantly wielded the unfamiliar cutlass. "We're going to save Kamisato Kakeru and we want your help to do it."

"With you two?"

Instead of hesitating over an answer, Blue Bikini Luca looked more confused why they would be making the suggestion in the first place.

"Hah. With you two!? That doesn't even make sense. I'm already saving Kamisato-kun just by obeying Kihara Yuiitsu no matter how difficult it might be.

I'm protecting the right hand that might be able to call him back!!"

Kamijou saw this as the first "distortion".

He looked over the eyepatch pirate girl's shoulder and exchanged a glance with Fran who was toying with the unloaded musket. Fran gave a small nod, so he thought carefully about which of the words that came to mind he should use.

"…You seem to be mistaken about something."

"About what?"

"Just doing what you're doing won't save Kamisato. Obeying Kihara Yuiitsu does not lead to saving him."

"What would you know about-…!?"

"Did Kamisato ever say that!? Did he ever say he could use World Rejecter to save someone he had supposedly erased!? Didn't he only ever talk about sending people away and never about bringing them back!?"

"!?"

"So your very foundation is wrong. Protecting that right hand won't lead to bringing him back. You have to start by accepting that, Luca, no matter how hard it is!!"

Even if she did, Luca might not help them.

So Kamijou looked to the second distortion. They all had to know something was wrong with continuing to obey Kihara Yuiitsu, so why did they continue doing so?

Kamijou gave the answer.

"If you just do what she says, things at least won't get any worse."

"Wha-…?"

"Isn't that what you were thinking, Luca? Or maybe you were thinking you could eventually search for a way to bring Kamisato back while Kihara Yuiitsu wasn't looking. If so, you were wrong. When exactly would that 'eventually' be? You kept thinking that, but you haven't even taken the first step. Pretending to think about something is the same as not thinking at all! You just decided that thoughtful pose looked cool!"

“Don’t be ridiculous! I really was working to help Kamisato-kun even as it wore me down and trampled on my pride…”

“How much something wears you down isn’t the same as achieving actual results.” Fran sounded exasperated behind the pirate girl. “And this too is a distortion. Human beings believe they are accomplishing something as long as they keep working at something. Think of a jigsaw puzzle, a puzzle ring, levelling up in a video game, or popping bubble wrap. Luca, has your effort really led to anything practical? Or was it more like a product of entertainment or a hobby?”

“I…I…”

“Time is always marching forward. If you stand still, things are bound to deteriorate. Kihara Yuiitsu is building up her foundation. She might not yet know what strange powers and abilities those 100 girls have, but if she encourages you to report on each other’s weaknesses, she will quickly have that information. This is the only time to get out ahead of her, but all of you are wasting that chance! Do you really want to do that? Won’t you regret it once you’re driven into a dead end? Try thinking through this again!!”

The pirate girl was shaken.

Her one visible eye was clearly wavering.

It was true the former Kamisato Faction was powerful and – more importantly – strange. Back when they had acted as a group along with Kamisato Kakeru, they had seemed like a swarm of army ants that devoured even the rules of the world. But that was also their biggest bottleneck. What if they were cut away from the group or they lost Kamisato Kakeru as their central pillar? They no longer had their group psychology or leadership. They had achieved the perfect golden ratio before, so changing it in any way now was entirely unnecessary. Luca was surprisingly fragile now that she was caught in a changing situation.

But…

“Even so,” said the eyepatch pirate girl. “That’s still no reason to trust you! You’re not Kamisato-kun. You haven’t done a damn thing to earn my trust! How can I know you’re telling the truth and why do I have to trust you right off the bat!?”

Yes.

Kamijou saw this as the final distortion.

Kamijou Touma was not Kamisato Kakeru. And just like Fran, Luca would only act

for Kamisato Kakeru's benefit. No one else could take his place, so no amount of persuasion would convince her to act for someone else's benefit.

Kamijou had known that, so he had more to say.

"Are you sure you aren't making a fundamental misunderstanding?"

"?"

"We need your magic. No, we want any knowledge we can get – magic or science – to save Kamisato. That's how ridiculously tough a problem World Rejecter is."

"But…so what? Why does that mean I have to listen to you!?"

"Because we can't do anything!"

Luca was taken aback by his overly blunt statement.

He seemed to be rejecting his overall premise, but he did not hesitate to continue.

"So we'll do whatever we can to support you! We'll lift you up and carry you within arm's reach! But finishing it off is your job. Luca, *use your magic to rescue your Kamisato*!! Is that still not acceptable!?"

The pirate girl was dumbfounded.

No, her thoughts themselves had ground to a halt.

"If it isn't, then that's the end. We're just assistants, so there's nothing we can do without someone to lift up. Then we can't save Kamisato! All because of your decision!!"

He knew that was a cheap way of putting it.

He also knew it was the kind of thing that boy would say as he worked to give everyone a push forward.

Then he spun the cutlass around in his hand. He gingerly grabbed the thick blade and held the hilt out toward the pirate girl.

"If that isn't acceptable, then end it yourself. Cut us down and return to what you were doing, Luca!! If that's really what you want and you're really too afraid to leave the rails laid out by Kihara Yuiitsu, then tear up and throw away the ticket to freedom we've given you!!"

"…Ah…"

"That's what you've been saying you want to do! Since you didn't seem to see what it was you were choosing, I spelled it out for you, Luca. So what will you do? Take advantage of the possibility in front of you, or kill it? Choose with your actions!!!!"

Even after all this, Pirate Girl Luca did not move.

No, she *could* not move so easily. She felt the weight of this decision too clearly to call it a farce and reject the offer.

Kamijou could not wait around here forever. If the girls changed their patrol routes on a whim or if the winds changed enough for Mary to catch their scent, they would be detected or the igloo entrance would be found. Someone might notice Luca had been away from her post for a while. They had no guarantee that not a single decibel of their voices had escaped the sand. The risk of detection and death undoubtedly increased with each passing second.

But he waited.

He waited for the words of the girl he himself had cornered.

"…I loved the sea."

Finally, those words escaped through the gap between her lips. They sounded unrelated to the current situation, but there had to be some connection in the pirate girl's head.

"I'm not talking about the liquid that covers 70% of the earth's surface and I don't care about the liquid with 3% salt content. The cramped, boring, and stifling gray cities cut everyone off from each other. But I loved the sea which always leads to a new land, is connected to all parts of the world, and always has someone waiting for you beyond the horizon."

Kamijou did not know who Luca had originally been or what her circumstances had been.

Kamisato had said they had all lived in a peaceful classroom while they each had their own world and worked toward their own dream, but it was possible they had had their normal problems in that normal place.

"He was the only one." Luca's voice trembled like she was confessing something. "I'm not talking about winning some prize or having some famous contest judge take a liking to it. He was the only one that looked at my canvas and said the

ocean looked like a blue doorway. Only Kamisato-kun saw my soul inside the painting…”

“…”

The girl had one eye covered by an eyepatch. Had that been coincidental or intentional? Either way, it had to have been meaningful for an artist to damage her eye.

“Are you sure?”

The pirate girl…no, someone from that unique classroom finally asked a question.

“Are you sure I can really bring Kamisato-kun back? Can I really do it myself instead of following someone else’s orders?”

They had nothing to support an answer. Kamijou and Fran had been focusing on what they wanted to do, but they had no actual plan as to how.

But that did not stop Kamijou from answering.

“If that’s what you really want to do, then nothing can stop you.”

Luca forcefully grabbed the cutlass held out to her. She could have chosen to slice Kamijou’s head apart, but the boy did not even blink. Seeing that, she spun the blade around and spoke.

“My name is Toyama Luca. Nice to meet you.”

Instead of cutting someone, she sheathed the blade and held her empty hand out to shake the hand of her new comrade in arms.

“Take back your words and I’ll kill you. That’s my only condition.”

Part 7

Kamijou was reluctant to leave.

But he could not stay in the District 7 station plaza for long. They were outnumbered and could not break through the enemy while protecting someone,

so they had to leave without waiting for Index and Othinus. He had to trust that was the best way of protecting them.

“But I’m surprised,” said Luca.

Once it was discovered the eyepatch girl in a large pirate hat had vanished, a search of the area would begin regardless of whether she had left on her own or been attacked. Once a search began, there would be no escaping Forensics Girl Ellen who was known as a tracer, Wolf Girl Mary whose sense of smell was more than 6000 times that of a normal person, and the many other combat members.

But Luca was sitting on the ground with her arms around her knees and not moving.

They were safe inside an igloo dug inside one of the sand piles half burying the city.

“We can’t walk around outside carelessly, but we can use the white sand to make ourselves something akin to a cardboard box house?”

She stroked the skull container at her waist as she spoke. It had a striking design, but Kamijou had seen bottles shaped like that when passing by the alcohol corner in the supermarket.

“It looks like this is fooling Ellen’s tracing and Mary’s nose,” commented Fran.

“That’s because we sprinkled that white sand behind us as we fled.”

Kamijou and the two girls could not stay in one place for long, so this was an important discovery. Ellen and the others might notice the possibility of an igloo before long, but they had no hint. After leaving the one they had dragged Luca into in the station plaza, they had knocked it down so it collapsed. It would take the other girls longer to discover the truth from those remains.

“It’s 1:30 PM…”

Fran still kept her backpack on and checked the digital clock on her communications equipment.

“I’m starting to get a little hungry.”

The small, microplastic-like granules must have kept the air inside because the igloo was pleasantly warm.

“I’d like to get things moving too. Luca, we’re willing to try anything that might

help save Kamisato. Tell us everything you know."

"Just to be clear, if I had the knowledge and skills to do it myself, I wouldn't have been sucking up to Kihara Yuiitsu like that in the first place. Please understand that this is a problem I can't solve on my own." The eyepatch pirate girl sighed. "Another world? A different world in the same timeline? Ignoring whether or not there's actually a way to interfere with that, if you want to interfere with Point B from Point A, you have to focus on the concept of imitation. You can also call it Idol Worship."

"Hm?"

"I'll explain. In the world of magic, objects with similar shapes will influence each other. For example, a doll can take on the injuries meant for a person."

There was no guarantee they could follow her explanation.

Kamijou and Fran exchanged a glance while sitting down.

"Um, so…what? I feel like Agnese or Birdway might have explained this before, but maybe not… Anyway, is it like that thing where people hammer a nail into a doll late at night?"

"That harms the shrine's holy tree, so you really shouldn't do it," piped in Fran.

"This is similar, but not quite the same. You're talking about infection magic. It's a type of curse that focuses on the target's hair contained inside the straw doll. The person's blood, fingernail, hair, or another part of their body is used to affect the whole. The straw doll itself is just a traditional method with no real origin behind it," explained Pirate Hat Luca. "Not all of them apply, but a lot of the magic circles drawn on the ground are simplified versions of the sun or moon. Just like a constellation table, the original shape is entirely lost, but carving that into the ground is still thought to draw in the power of the heavenly body."

Kamijou kind of got it, but kind of didn't.

He tilted his head and asked a question.

"So what's the problem here?"

"Oh, honestly." Luca mussed up her bangs with a hand. "Whatever method we use to rescue Kamisato-kun, it's going to start with using that imitative magic. After preparing something extremely similar in this world and that world, we can open a tunnel between the two points. If we're going to rely on magical power, that's the only way to do it."

"…"

"But you understand that that's easier said than done, right? We want to open the tunnel, but that means sending some kind of signpost into the other world. It's like having our keys locked in the car."

"But." Hoodie Bikini Fran hung her head a little. "While it's a one-way ticket, there is a way to send things from here to there."

"You mean Kihara Yuiitsu's right hand? How are we supposed to get close to that? There are more girls around her than in that plaza. Sneaking in, having her use World Rejecter on just the object we want, and escaping safely would be impossible."

Kamijou thought as the two girls discussed the difficult problem on either side of him.

This world and that world.

The objects and people blown away by World Rejecter.

Imitation. Objects with similar shapes would influence each other.

"…No, wait."

"?"

"We might be able to do it. We might already have what we need without even getting Yuiitsu to lend us a hand."

"What do you mean?"

"Just so you know, we can't use infection magic between Kamisato-kun and his severed right hand. World Rejecter is too powerful to function as a catalyst. That would be like taking a metal pin surrounded by ultra-powerful electromagnets and trying to use a different magnet to create a compass out of it."

"That's not what I meant. I'm talking about the imitative magic, not the infection magic. The one where things with similar shapes influence each other."

Fran and Luca looked puzzled and urged him to continue.

He did not care if this was not a perfect answer. It only had to inspire further discussion. That was all he was hoping for.

And so he threw it out there.

“The A.A.A. The ire between Kamisato and Yuiitsu began with a golden retriever wielding that weapon. If Kamisato defeated that dog, wouldn’t the A.A.A. have been sent to that that world?”

Part 8

Kamijou knew very little about the A.A.A. He could not even say what it had originally been designed for. What was powering that thing that Mikoto had readily piloted during the heat wave, and how did it work? Could it even be fully explained with science alone?

But an A.A.A. had been used by a lot of people: Misaka Mikoto, Kihara Yuiitsu, and even Plant Girl Claire if a decoy counted. And he knew an original had to exist somewhere.

And its owner had been defeated by Kamisato Kakeru in his prime.

That original device had provided Misaka Mikoto with destructive inspiration when she found it and picked it up the other day.

“Let’s find Misaka,” suggested Kamijou.

If Mikoto had been able to use the original A.A.A. as-is, she would not have gotten the help of Tokiwadai Middle School to put together her own version of the weapon. The original she had based it on must have stopped functioning. But Kamijou’s group did not need the original A.A.A. to actually run. They only needed Devices A1 and A2 that had similar shapes and functions so they had a starting point for the imitative magic.

“She might have gathered up and stored the wreckage or spare parts of the original A.A.A. If we can borrow that, won’t we have the signpost for this side and that side?”

The hangar at Tokiwadai Middle School had been thoroughly destroyed by Kihara Yuiitsu. If the original had been kept there, they might be in trouble, but that was only if they wanted to use the A.A.A. as a weapon. Even if it had been reduced to scraps, they might manage as long as they could prove they were the same parts

on a compositional and functional level.

But as an Academy City resident, Kamijou did not have a good sense of what magic allowed and what it did not.

It would be faster to let Pirate Girl Luca see it for herself.

They had no time to spare.

“Let’s stop by Tokiwadai Middle School for now.”

“Hm? But isn’t that where…?”

“Yeah. It was destroyed by the Elements under Yuiitsu’s control. Misaka and the others might not still be there, but we might find a clue as to where they’ve gone.”

Some skepticism was natural, but Fran and Luca readily agreed since this gave them an actual destination. The concepts being late or out past curfew did not exist at the moment. They were free to go wherever they wanted in Academy City, but that had left them with no clear destination. It may have been easier to have someone else set a goal for them.

They checked a roadside map to confirm where they were, where the School Garden was, and what route to take.

“An elevated route runs almost directly there, so it will be safest to walk under that,” said Fran.

“?”

“Maya the ghost might be watching from the sky, so we’re a little less likely to be found if we keep a roof over our heads.”

The long elevated route was likely for cars instead of trains and they walked below it using the nearly H-shaped reinforced concrete pillars as their guide. It must not have been a popular location because there were very few buildings. The long narrow space had been forcibly developed into a monthly parking lot and some empty space had been turned into materials yards or basketball courts. They saw the occasional small store, but those were all for used trading cards, damaged jeans, or the like, so it was a junky and chaotic space.

It was a very different experience from walking the ordinary path.

It was a unique type, but a disaster had befallen the city. It took a lot of time just

traveling by foot to their destination.

Rabbit-Ear Antennae Fran spoke up while fidgeting near the round antenna on her butt.

“Even if we get this…A.A.A. was it? What are our odds of success?”

“Again, don’t place the entire burden on my shoulders. If I could deal with this on my own, I wouldn’t have done anything Kihara Yuiitsu said.”

Instead of Kamijou, it was Luca who answered while brushing off her swimsuit’s butt.

“Personally, I’m hoping for some kind of chemical reaction with Academy City’s bizarre technology. You’ve done a lot of disturbing research into time and space, right?”

Something must have bothered her because Fran bent her finger like a hook, stuck it inside the butt of her bikini, and adjusted it.

“Hmm. Trying to break the speed of light barrier is pretty romantic. I’m sick of hearing about people just trying to use a wormhole, though.”

Luca also tugged at her swimsuit. It was a lot like how infectious a cough could be at a school assembly.

“We don’t have to try for the farthest reaches of the universe. People can disappear right here on this blue planet. The question is whether or not we can expand that small, nearby seed to a universal scale.”

Then Kamijou-san, a tsukkomi for us all, exploded.

“What is with you two!? Quit messing with your butts! How am I supposed to relax!?”

The two girls turned back toward him and Fran pouted her small lips.

“We’re the ones that can’t relax.”

“You were the one that suggested hiding in that igloo made of white sand. Sit in there for a while and, um, you get the sand in your swimsuit.”

After putting it to words, the two of them seemed unable to stand it any longer. It may have been the difference between a vague sense of itchiness and finding the actual mosquito bite.

“I can’t keep going without getting this sand out. I won’t be able to give my peak performance.”

“We used hot water and soap like normal back in the mall with Kamisato-kun. What did your group do in that school?”

“We had the pool water, but we couldn’t waste it. The most we could do was wipe off the sweat with a damp towel and use some of the valuable mint stuff to fight the smell. I think we only had a bottle or two of water for that. But according to the chemistry club, there are only six or seven basic smells and mint is one of them, so it’s a lot like a primary color and can more easily override other smells. Although when we didn’t have any available, we would fish through the garbage cans for used coffee filters or teabags.”

He ended up answering without even thinking, but this was not the time for that kind of trivia.

“Hey, wait. Those Useful Spider people keep talking about the 48 Hours to Restore Order, but we don’t actually know how much of the infrastructure has recovered. Is there even any running water?”

“Nn…”

They had just crossed a chain-link fence and entered a monthly parking lot. Luca tried turning a faucet located on the edge of the asphalt for cleaning. They heard scraping metal, but not a drop came out.

However, the two girls had not been expecting anything. They looked around and their eyes landed on a few parked vehicles.

“There’s a cleaning company truck.”

“Yes, let’s borrow some of their equipment.”

Kamijou did not have time to stop them.

An Element must have stepped on the truck because its chassis was bent and all of its windows were broken. Fran and Luca stuck their hand in, unlocked it from the inside, and began searching through it. Kamijou wondered if they were borrowing a towel, but…

“I wish that was enough to get this perverted sand out.”

“Oh, I found a roller for carpet. Won’t that work without water?”

“I’d also love to wash off this sticky sweat, but it looks like we won’t have any water.”

“There’s sterilization alcohol bottled up like vegetable oil. That won’t harm our skin, right?”

Kamijou could hear them rummaging through things. When he heard rustling cloth and realized they were getting down to “work”, he quickly turned the other way.

And the whole affair was reflected in the glass of the next vehicle over.

(Gyaaaah!!)

Unfortunately, the die had been cast. That may have a convenient phrase, but honestly confessing what had happened would only leave scars of sadness on everyone’s hearts.

“If I go like this…and this…okay! Got it off! That stubborn inner thigh demon came off so easily!!”

“Ow. Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow. The tape is caught. Ahh, the tape is caught on the hair!?”

“Won’t it lose its stickiness if you pour alcohol on it? Think of it like using oil to peel a sticker off the wall.”

Meanwhile, Kamijou Touma covered his face with his hands and sobbed. He had been too naïve and could only blame his own negligence for not stopping them sooner.

But covering his vision may have been a mistake.

Just as he blindly tried to lean against the sliding door behind him, he lost his support and fell backwards. The window had already been broken, but the girls had apparently left the bent door open.

The pointy-haired boy tumbled helplessly back into the cleaning truck. And there he saw…

“It’s. So. Hot…”

“F-Fran?”

“Vahhh… Fraaaan, open the window more. I need some wind in here… You didn’t

switch the heat wave back on, did you?”

“Gyaaaaah!! Put your swimsuits back on properly! Or at least use that coat to hide something. I can just about see some pretty serious areas there, Luca!!!”

His frantic cries did not seem to reach the girls’ ears. Their faces and the rest of their bodies had flushed a nice pink and their heads were wobbling left and right.

(If they’re that embarrassed, why did they do this!?)

That was his first thought, but that did not seem to be what was happening.

He sensed an odd aroma from the clear liquid dripping down their bodies, so he glanced toward the bottles lying on the floor.

They were for sterilizing alcohol.

They had 75% alcohol content and were a category-3 medical supply.

“That’s more than vodka!! Dump that over your heads and you’ll absorb it through your eyelids, nose, lips, and plenty of other parts of your body!”

“Eh heh. Hee hee hee.”

“Urp. Something’s coming back up…”

“Don’t get out of the truck! Not with your clothes all out of place, Luca!!”

“But it’s way too hot…”

“And is it just me or are those clothes a lot tighter now? What happened to your body!? It wasn’t like that before!!”

“I can change what age I look liiike, so I thought it might do less damage if I was an adullllt…”

He recalled how she had grown younger and tried to escape him when he first tried to capture her.

Now he had two people to look after. Kamijou Touma earned the valuable trophy of helping a hopelessly drunk girl get her swimsuit back on (with a two-at-once bonus).

They were shamefully intoxicated, but they could not stay here for long.

“Anyway…let’s go. We can take our time if we have to, but we need to continue on to Tokiwadai Middle School.”

“I’m herhectly hine. Hy are hoo ho horried?”

“I’m not trusting you when ‘h’ is just about the only consonant you can get out.”

“Pii pyoro pyoro pii kyuru kyuru kyuru…”

“And you stop communicating with aliens like a fax machine, Fran!!”

With Fran on his right and Luca on his left, Kamijou Touma looked something like a grand prix winner with his arms around the waists of two swimsuit girls who were resting their heads on his shoulders, but they were really nothing but a burden. Survival was about more than deadly threats of tigers and bears. The scariest part was how unpredictable everything was.

“It’s 3 PM… Hic, it’s time for an afternoon snack.”

Even so, they planned to escape the monthly parking lot. Climbing the fence would be impossible at the moment, so they left through the official exit to avoid the fence.

He felt nice and warm due to the proximity of the girls whose body temperatures had risen by about 0.7 degrees, but then a thought came to mind.

(Will this really take us to Kamisato, dammit?)

And then it happened.

Something soft fell from the clear blue sky and toward the asphalt at their feet.

At first, Kamijou could not accurately comprehend what had happened before his eyes.

He wondered if he had been hit by some alcohol vapors in that truck, but that was not the case.

He looked into the blue sky instead of the ground, but that may have been a self-defense instinct shifting his focus away from the extreme abnormality.

Time stood still.

It was more than just 5 or 10 gazes that stared down at him from the elevated highway. He was pierced by “many” gazes.

“W-wa-waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!???”

He could only scream.

It was as if the rapid change from the midsummer weather had triggered large hail. Incredibly raw sounds of impact came from all around him.

He could not figure out what was actually happening.

People were falling.

It was a downpour of human beings.

His vision blurred as the truth dawned on him. The tears were accompanied by an intense desire to vomit.

He would have preferred to find he was trapped in a self-made nightmare world brought on by the powerful alcohol. A dream was only a patchwork scene created from his own memories, so it would not include anything incomprehensible.

He collapsed backwards with the accidentally intoxicated girls still in his arms. That sent them back below the elevated highway. Immediately afterwards, someone fell right on the spot they had been standing in. At this point, it was effectively a carpet bombing. The entire area felt dangerous, just like when an elevated window broke and glass poured down like rain.

Nevertheless, he could not ignore this. He did not know when someone else would fall down, but it was also possible someone could fall in the same spot like a second scoop of ice cream. He left Fran and Luca safely below the elevated highway, crawled forward, and reached his hand “outside”. He grabbed the arm of the person who had first fallen and dragged them below.

It was a small girl.

She was younger than Kamijou, so she may have been in middle school like Mikoto. She was fighting the cold with a blanket carelessly draped over her school swimsuit, so she looked something like a turtle that forgot to draw in its head. The long-haired girl appeared woozy, but she did not have any visible bone fractures or internal bleeding.

However, he was afraid to grab her shoulders and shake her.

He only shouted in her ear when trying to wake her.

“What happened!? What the hell happened!?”

“…Ahh…”

The elevated highway was only about 10 meters tall. That was like jumping from a three-story school building. Since she had landed on asphalt, he was not sure if there was any hope of saving her or not.

“I’m…a backup dancer…”

“?”

She was trying to say something, but her context-less statement meant nothing to him.

Meanwhile, he heard a commotion up above. That told him what the people gathered on the elevated highway wanted to do.

“Hurry! Hurry up!!”

“Once you’re ready, get to the wires! Jump to the windows across the way!!”

“Grab the coats, the blankets, the sleeping bags, or whatever else! Retrieve everything inside!!”

When he looked below the hellish elevated highway again, he saw a large discount store alongside it. A shutter covered the entrance and the wall was somewhat buried in the white Element sand. To force their way inside, they seemed to have set up wires from the elevated highway to the higher windows, but…

(Why are they so intent on things that keep the cold out? If they’re cold, can’t they change from their swimsuits to their uniforms?)

But as Kamijou wondered that, an unexpected voice reached him.

“It’s not normal for that heat to drop below zero so fast! What we saw on the Sphere must be true. An ice age is coming soon!!”

Part 9

“Hm, hm, hm, hmm.”

In the District 5 college shelter known as Academy, Ghost Girl Maya let will-o’-the-wisp-like phosphorescent drones fly around her while she hummed happily at how far her information had spread.

“The microwave-induced heat wave was actually caused by solar winds.”

Academy City was quite comfortable for her with the internet and phones out. Everyone was viewing the same information like they were watching roadside TVs, so group psychology would readily kick in. They were like heads of wheat blowing in the wind.

“Those abnormal solar winds should be seen as an anomaly in solar activity as a whole, so an ice age will occur at this rate. The 55 degree weather dropped below 0, but it won’t stop there. This time, it’ll fall more than 50 degrees in the negative direction. Good, this is working!”

The ghost girl hunched forward while the sound effects of the monitor’s virtual keyboard sounded loudly.

The former Kamisato Faction controlled more shelters than just Academy. The girl in burial clothes and a heart-shaped headdress hesitated over which colorful vegetable stick to pull from the glass cup in her hand and she contacted some other shelters through the Sphere which surrounded her with its control petals.

“Marine, Scala, Milcah. How are things looking on your end?”

“Great, great. Here at Health, more than half of everything is about invisible jinxes and the occult. Just like blood type fortunetelling, I’m just flavoring it a bit with science and numbers. That kind of rumor works really well here☆”

“There’s no real problem here in Prison, but isn’t this a weird rumor? We already revealed the microwaves came from Fran’s station, right? What good is sending out misinformation that it’s solar winds and a sign that solar activity is about to drop?”

“The people here at Journalism have started surreptitiously investigating it, so should I put a stop to that?”

Maya had control of the network, but she could only do so much with her one key station.

The other Spheres that assisted as regional stations were nearly irreplaceable.

(I guess it’s time to say goodbye to my makeshift bot army. Okay, let’s use these real accounts to drive up the hit counts!!)

“This will not be a problem. New theories do not replace the old ones; they line up alongside them. They’ll be suspicious of Fran while also fearing an ice age. Human beings see no contradiction in holding two conflicting fears. Just like they laugh off ghosts as unscientific yet can’t fully deny their existence.”

The ghost girl smiled thinly as she sent out instructions and used both hands to lift a cup of cocoa that gave off a slight smell of mint extract.

By switching to another screen and messing with the search mode a little, she could easily determine which of the scattered shelters were on her side. The ghost girl was mixing a password or code word into the instructions she sent to the shelter rulers who approved of the broadcast network based around her key station. By searching that phrase, she could graphically see her territory on the map.

“And people prefer sensational and shocking information more than accurate information. The 55 degree weather dropped right down below 0, but that isn’t it

returning to normal. It's going to drop even further. *A lot of people had to have been vaguely worried about that.* Not many people have accurate specs on Fran's station, after all."

The frequency of those code words showed how loyal they were.

The former Kamisato Faction would reply 100% of the time. If a shelter noncommittally did it about half the time, they were leaning toward her side. If they only did it infrequently, they were neutral. If they never did it at all, she viewed them as an enemy.

"Oh, I see. So if Fran's group does want to get rid of this misinformation, they'll have to reveal the data on her station. And that means confessing that she really was behind the heat wave."

"That's right," confirmed Maya. "Neither confirming nor denying the misinformation will end the chaos. That's what makes a multi-stage attack so great. People can handle information coming from one direction, but if they receive confirmations coming from multiple directions at once, they tend to give in right away. They might normally laugh off the concept of exorcism, but if they're locked in a small room and told again and again that it's the right thing to do, they can't stop themselves from ganging up on the subject and beating them to death. Just by hearing different people agreeing with some amount of time between will trick them into thinking it's been confirmed by multiple sources."

Translucent Maya used the collar around her exposed cleavage to fan herself and then snapped her fingers.

"And Milcah. Your Journalism is run by a triumvirate, right? I'll try applying external pressure to break that down, so brace for impact just to be safe."

"That's fine, but you can't imbalance the leadership by focusing on any one of the three leaders."

"Not if I do it that way, no. A and B would join together to shut down C's opinion. …That's why I'll spread the information to the people instead of the rulers. If the people learn 'what's really going on' after losing the right to decide anything for themselves, they'll lose all control. Especially…yes. I can add in some half-truths about the Elements that attacked Journalism having been intentionally drawn in to leave you with fewer mouths to feed."

"You monster."

"I prefer the term 'beautiful ghost'. It looks nicer."

“Well, we are acting as the pawns of brutal and monstrous Yuiitsu to hold onto the Kamisato Boy’s lifeline.”

Needless to say, Maya’s goal was not controlling the Sphere network, manipulating the people of Academy City from hiding, or using misinformation about an ice age to throw a bunch of people from elevated highways.

“Oh? District 7’s…Show Business is acting oddly. They’re using the elevated route. But I can’t use them to locate those two unless they spread out on the surface.”

She wanted to locate Kamijou Touma and Karasuma Fran.

She also wanted to discover what had happened to Toyama Luca who was missing.

It was all bait for that.

Meaning…

“I can’t rely on them.”

Maya whispered in a lovely voice that would send a shiver down the spine of all who heard it.

“So I’ll spread some embers from the key stations in all 23 Districts to the national network. Now, Fran. What will you do? If you use your specialty to cross this sea of chaos, word from witnesses will reach me in no time flat☆”

Part 10

Given the pace at which people were falling, he could not save them all.

“What does that matter…?”

In fact, no amount of saving them would improve the Kamisato situation.

“What does that matter!!!???”

He knew all that, but Kamijou continued to pull more people – as many as he could – underneath the elevated highway. The most he could do was dig through a cleaning van, sprinkle sterilization alcohol on them, and use makeshift splints wrapped with duct tape to set their broken limbs.

But even as he did that, he learned something.

These people were from a shelter.

It was apparently known as Show Business.

They generally decided things by majority rule, but instead of one vote per person, people had as many votes as they had fans. To use a more formal term, it may have been similar to a representative democracy.

The first girl calling herself a backup dancer seemed to be connected to that. The number of votes someone had determined their class. Those included “regular”, “center”, and “national”, but Kamijou did not know how many there were in all. Still, “backup dancer” did not sound like a high level idol.

The system had likely formed because the original school had been focused on song and dance, but something else caught Kamijou’s attention.

“What’s this about an ice age!? Where did they get that information from!? Hey, Fran, can you figure anything out through the Sphere!?”

“Hm…”

Fran was still woozy and her spine was somewhat limp. She sat right on the

asphalt below the elevated highway and she tilted her head like a stuffed bear.

“About that Sphere…”

“?”

“It was cut off. Since Ellen and the others showed up at the meetup point, they almost certainly knew which Sphere I was using to relay the information, but I suspect they also physically severed the key station from the network.”

“Dammit!!”

(Do they know where we are, so they’re trying to catch us in this riot? No, if they knew exactly where we were, they would just send their own girls in. That means we’re a stage ahead of that. Are they starting these riots all over, hoping we’ll give away our location!?)

The former Kamisato Faction was sending out deadly misinformation, but Kamijou’s group could not argue back. And if the enemy was spreading this disinformation from multiple regional stations connected to their key station, the chaos would not be contained to Show Business alone. If they did not get rid of the disinformation, the riots would spread throughout the city’s shelters. The fear of a fictional ice age would lead people to steal blankets, destroy clothing as they fought over it, and needlessly kill each other.

The Spheres were what mattered. They could not escape their helpless situation without access to a new data terminal.

Kamijou let out a long, quiet sigh.

And he spoke.

“Let’s overcome this. And then let’s steal Show Business’s Sphere to get a new key station. That’s the only way to extinguish this ice age misinformation as quickly as possible.”

“But what about the Sphere’s key?”

“Yeah, if it’s the same as Trial back at that park, their ruler will have it.”

Kamijou pointed up at the thick reinforced concrete of the elevated highway.

“If they’re inciting the others to action while waving a flag out front…then let’s grab them and steal it. Even if that means fighting the Show Business people who are only being manipulated. That’s the only way to save them all!”

The Sphere was a limited data tool. Assuming this ruler did not want to quit like the one at the park, they would probably want to actively use it. Popularity determined influence in Show Business, so it would be a valuable resource indeed. The ruler was unlikely to hand it over if they were asked.

But Kamijou still had to do it.

There were no perpetrators and victims in this riot. Entirely baseless information had worked its way across the entire city, everyone was risking their lives on something entirely meaningless, and Kamijou could only imagine Index, Mikoto, or the others diving from the elevated highway. He had to end this before that happened. He had to put an end to the nonsense that was infecting people's brains and good sense like a computer virus.

But just as he thought that, something else arrived.

Civilization was still dead in these streets, but he heard metal treads tearing at the asphalt. The speakers were overhead this time and they produced a somehow cracked voice as if from a loudspeaker, but a calm feminine voice spoke all the same.

"This is Useful Spider. The 48 Hours to Restore Order are still underway. Everyone, please calm down and obey our officers' instructions. There is no scientific basis for the idea that an ice age is coming. Please view the situation rationally and assist us as we work toward recovery."

This was not something that could be stopped by a mere announcement.

And the people in the half-truck most likely knew that. They did not even wait for a response. Once they completed the announcement like it was a rite of passage, the device on the open bed of the truck rumbled as it began to rotate. It looked like a tow truck, but it was something else.

(A gun…turret…?)

Kamijou simply watched it happen because it was such an unrealistic sight.

Then he heard another announcement.

"We have determined the normal manual is inadequate here, so we shall take emergency measures. On our special authority, the corresponding people's human rights will be temporarily rescinded and we will work to secure them and transport them to the nearest hospital, but please understand that this is necessary to protect your lives and property as much as possible."

They fired.

With a tremendous noise, a torrent of extremely high pressure water attacked the elevated highway.

The term “high pressure water cannon” flashed through Kamijou’s mind.

There was nothing the Show Business people could do while making their deadly tightrope walk across the unstable wires.

A dull sound rang out when they were hit.

And then a great number of people flew off the opposite side of the wide elevated highway. They slammed into the wall of entirely unrelated buildings, fell down like a basketball being sucked into the hoop, and landed on the piles of white sand. And this was all on the opposite end of a three-lane elevated highway. Even with the sand to cushion their landing, the hit from the water alone had to have given them at least whiplash.

“What the hell is going on!?”

With everything going to hell in different ways all around him, Kamijou’s mind was nearly overwhelmed. And then he heard an overhead sound like cloth beating the air. It was a helicopter. He did not even want to imagine what would happen next.

“We are here to assist the emergency measures. Please get down on the ground to display your intent to surrender.”

Something heavy fell down, but this was different from the previous diving. It was like giant pieces of hail were falling on top of the elevated highway. A few of them missed and fell on the road next to it.

They were a bucket’s worth of water…or perhaps of gelatin.

But even that would provide a decent impact when dropped from a height that made a screw or nail a deadly weapon. The rioters who could be targeted from the ground were knocked down by the high pressure water and any who escaped to the center of the highway were knocked out by the water dropped by the helicopter. It was a human hunt with no hope of escape.

That was bad enough on its own, but Kamijou felt a great malice in the fact that they were using water as a weapon.

Water had been exchanged like currency just the day before, but these people

had enough to waste it like this. This showed Useful Spider's position of superiority as they controlled the infrastructure recovery.

Kamijou could not sit idly by any longer.

Useful Spider seemed to think this would end the chaos as quickly as possible, but they also did not care if they were throwing the boys and girls of Show Business off of the elevated highway. Letting them take charge would not improve the situation. Doing that would only be hitting the fast-forward button on the damage.

"Fran, Luca!"

He called out to the girls, but they were still intoxicated by the alcohol and would be no help in a fight.

"Funii… If you're going somewhere, you can take my UFO balloon."

"I can? No, wait. Not when the former Kamisato Faction is probably monitoring this riot. Listen, don't call in the balloon! It'll give away our location!!"

Kamijou took off running without waiting for a response. The elevated highway was about 10 meters tall, so it would normally have been out of reach. But a metal ladder for inspections and maintenance climbed up the side of the reinforced concrete pillars located at even intervals. He grabbed the rarely used cold metal and climbed up.

Meanwhile, the screams and sounds of firing water continued. When he looked toward the noise, his eyes met those of someone falling upside down through the air. He climbed past the tragic scene and reached a metal door that reminded him of a square manhole. He pushed it up and arrived on the curb of the elevated highway.

It was hell on earth.

Only during a marathon would more than 100 boys and girls gather here. The wide three-lane road was packed full and they were mercilessly attacked by the high-pressure water from the side and the gelatin bombing from above. The helicopter had a synthetic fiber bag dangling down like a sandbag and, each time the helicopter turned, water would fall and people would collapse.

It went beyond a single victim. Each blast of the water cannon and the bombing caused a chain reaction that affected a great many. The damage spread as they toppled like dominos. Useful Spider was only thinking about resolving this as

quickly as possible, so what happened to the people was a secondary concern.

(This is ridiculous, dammit. I already have enough on my plate with Kamisato!!)

Kamijou had no guarantee of his own safety from this point on. Useful Spider would not see him as any different and Show Business might gang up on him if they noticed he was not one of them or that he was after their ruler. The bat who could not be of the beasts or of the birds had to crouch down and run across the battlefield full of icy spraying water.

He had no information on who exactly was the ruler here.

He started by running toward a girl in a figure skating outfit, perhaps both as a spectacle that would bring popularity and to keep out the cold.

Shockwaves burst nearby with more force than he would have thought possible for water. Each time, people toppled like dominos and were dragged to the wet asphalt. One boy was not allowed even that and flew high through the air like a three point shot. And as the swimsuit girls and boys gathered in the center to escape the water cannon, gelatin blunt weapons mercilessly poured down from overhead. Useful Spider were urging the students to surrender, but it did not look like the girls and boys had any fighting spirit left as they sat dazed on the road.

Everything about it was terrible.

And so Kamijou poured all his strength into taking even one more step forward. He had to erase the ice age misinformation and switch off this hellish scene as soon as possible.

“It’s just like the video on the Sphere!! The frogs and ladybugs that should be hibernating are out because they’re sensitive to changes in solar magnetism. This is a prophecy, a message. The abnormal weather isn’t over. It’s only just beginning!!”

The figure skater girl was shouting something with a plastic megaphone to her mouth.

“As you can see, the adults interfered the second we got here. What more proof do you need!? The talk of an ice age is true!! The temperature isn’t just dropping from 50 degrees to below 0. It’s continuing on down to 50 below!! Don’t let them take the blankets and sleeping bags! We found this oasis, not them!!”

(Is she stupid!? Of course animals are going to mistakenly end their hibernation when the temperature rises like that!! Besides, isn’t assuming strange animal

behavior is a definite harbinger of disaster one step away from the occult!?)

No one would listen to him if he spoke aloud.

Kamijou ran with all his might and tackled the girl at her slender waist. A strange shriek escaped her throat and she fell onto the wet road. He climbed on top of her, placed his hands on her throat, and half-crushed her windpipe while shouting down at her.

“Are you the ruler!? Where’s the key to the Sphere!?”

He could tell from the look in her eyes that she was trying to say something with some rationality and calculation behind it, so he did not hesitate to press his body weight down on her. She must have had difficulty breathing now because her face turned blue and she shook her head below him.

“I’ll be asking yes or no questions. We don’t have time for you to answer anything more than that! Do you understand!? Answer me with a nod!!”

She finally nodded.

Kamijou took his body weight off of his arms and asked again.

“Are you the ruler?”

She shook her head.

“Then who is? You can just point!!”

There was unmistakable fear in the figure skater girl’s eyes. She slowly raised one hand and pointed her trembling finger in one direction. She would not have been calm enough to lie or put on an act.

“Hey, you! What do you think you’re doing!?”

A righteous-sounding voice questioned him from surprisingly close by, so Kamijou grabbed the girl’s collar and got up. He then swung the weakened girl horizontally to throw her at the righteous red ranger. While the boy was stopping the impact, Kamijou crouched down and ran forward to hide in the rioting crowd.

He moved in the direction that figure skater provocateur had pointed and he quickly spotted a likely suspect. Most of the boys and girls protected themselves with coats and blankets worn over their swimsuits, but one tall girl stood out in a naval coat with golden embroidery. She could be best described as a crossdressing beauty. Popularity was everything in Show Business, so that

androgynous look must have helped her gather support from both the boys and girls.

She seemed to have noticed him. She took a few steps back, but she could not order the others to secure an escape route for her during this chaos. Kamijou decided to tackle her from low to the ground, just like the figure skater girl.

But just before he did, a powerful force grabbed his shoulder.

“I was asking…”

His forward momentum was negated and he was forcibly spun around to face that previous embodiment of righteousness. The boy did not hesitate to clench his fist.

“…what the hell you think you’re doing!!”

When the boy threw his punch, Kamijou collapsed backwards like a solid branch, but not because the blow had knocked him out.

He had intentionally fallen back to get low to the ground.

A moment later, a frightening blast of water was released diagonally upwards from the ground.

A strange shout of “bogyeh!!” came from the ranger’s mouth and his body bent backwards. And as Kamijou avoided getting knocked down with him, he saw the unfamiliar boy turn into a shooting star. He slammed into the wall of a building beyond the elevated highway and he fell down. It was unclear if he would survive the 10 meter fall.

(I couldn’t do anything, not even give a word of warning. Dammit!!)

Kamijou stayed low to the ground to avoid the continuing blasts of water, but that was when he made a mistake.

He was in Academy City.

He needed to be cautious of more than just Useful Spider’s next-generation weapons.

As Kamijou more or less crawled along, some kind of powerful blow hit him in the solar plexus.

By the time he realized he had been knocked upwards from below, he was

already more than a meter into the air. He felt just like he had received a powerful body blow, so instead of feeling an urge to vomit, he had trouble breathing. He noticed the crossdressing beauty holding her palm out toward him with a frightened look in her eyes. Whether it was wind or a direct shockwave, she had hit him with some kind of esper power.

And the problem did not end there.

His body had floated up which removed him from his nearly crawling position, so he was exposed to the high-pressure water blast.

“Kh…!!!???”

They did not even wait for him to have time to feel the fear.

The blast from below the elevated highway scored a direct hit on his defenseless body. He was knocked straight to the side. His hips slammed into the guard rail and then flew unnaturally upwards. But he may have been lucky his vector had shifted. Unlike the previous red ranger, he was not thrown off the other end of the elevated highway and landed just barely on the inner edge of the soundproofing wall.

Even so, he took great damage.

He could not get up properly. He did not even have the energy to writhe on the ground. It may not have felt quite like getting hit by a car, but it did feel like getting hit by a mid-sized motorcycle while crossing an intersection. He could have sworn the core of his body had been knocked out of place.

“Kah…hah…”

His vision was blurry as he lay face-up on the ground, but that upside-down vision showed the crossdressing beauty slowly backing away with her palm still held toward him. She was escaping. The ruler would escape. He knew that, but his body would not move and he doubted his body would last if she fired that esper power again. He doubted she could hold back when she was acting out of fear rather than anger.

(I can’t believe…this…)

He reached his unsteady right hand out toward her, but not because he was trying to use Imagine Breaker.

He was on the verge of passing out.

(If I can't get the key and erase the misinformation from the key station…I can't… stop any of this…)

Then the crossdressing beauty fired "something" to snap the last thread of his consciousness.

Or she meant to.

Just before she could, a sound like salt water poured onto a neon tube came from the helicopter circling above.

The phenomenon was accompanied by bluish-white electricity, but Kamijou did not immediately understand what had happened. However, the malfunctioning helicopter quickly searched for an emergency landing point as it unsteadily descended.

He did not even have time to feel surprise.

He next heard another loud sound from directly below and the half-truck equipped with a high-pressure water cannon fell silent. Only the residual sound of something bursting echoed around the area. Kamijou and the nearly suicidal Show Business rioters did not know what to do.

But then a hint of recognition finally reached Kamijou's mind.

"Elec…tricity?"

After muttering the word under his breath, he quickly rolled onto his stomach and pressed his right hand against the wet pavement.

A moment later, something frightening raced through the entire elevated highway. It ran across the water-soaked pavement and accurately knocked everyone there unconscious. It really was like invisible fingers had flicked off a switch on the back of their heads. With a dull sound, the boys and girls collapsed dangerously to the road. They could not resist in the slightest. The figure skater girl, the crossdressing beauty, and everyone else were dealt with in a single attack.

Kamijou felt his heart pounding in his chest.

Was he alone fine because he had pressed his right hand against the wet pavement just before the attack?

It had been electricity. And a high voltage current at that. Kamijou only knew of one person who could rival a lightning strike by reaching 1 billion volts. Not even

the military clones based on her had that much power.

Which meant…

(Misaka…Mikoto…?)

He had been unable to stop the unpleasant sweat even though he was soaking wet in the midwinter, but now he breathed a sigh of relief. Just like during the heat wave, she seemed to be saving him at every turn. And now he would not need to directly visit Tokiwadai Middle School. He felt like he had been holding a bowstring taut for a long time and that he had finally been blessed with the power gained by releasing it.

That was when he heard a quiet metallic sound.

No, if this really was Misaka Mikoto like he thought it was, then he may not have been able to hear it from atop the elevated highway.

It sounded like an arcade coin being flicked by a thumb.

But that made no sense. Misaka Mikoto would not need to use her signature move here. The helicopter and half truck were already destroyed and all the rioters on the highway had been knocked out. There should not have been anyone left to attack.

But then something strange happened before his eyes.

A blast from directly below broke a portion of the elevated highway like a chocolate bar.

“Wha-…?”

He did not understand what had happened, but something even more incomprehensible happened regardless. More orange spears were sporadically launched at thrice the speed of sound. The highway crumbled as they pierced into it from below. The road was broken into blocks a few dozen meters long and the destruction was approaching Kamijou.

The person down below had to have noticed the survivors. Otherwise, she would not have bothered to send the high-voltage current along the wet road.

And yet she delivered a finishing blow.

At this rate, she would tear apart the elevated highway despite the unconscious boys and girls on it.

“Kh…”

(What the hell is she doing…!?)

Kamijou grabbed the transparent soundproofing wall that had broken from the propagated shockwaves, forced strength into his battered body, and slowly stood up once more. The high-voltage current was coming from the ground, but he did not have time to slowly descend the maintenance and inspection ladder. He looked down through a gap in the broken soundproofing wall and saw a pile of white Element sand. He was dizzied by the height. He recalled the boys and girls whose broken limbs he had treated.

But he could not hesitate.

Just as the highway was going to truly collapse thanks to a blast from below, he exhaled and crossed that line. He leaned out through the gap in the soundproofing wall, onto the guardrail, and balanced onto his stomach to tilt like a seesaw and then out into the empty air.

Only after doing it did he realize he had screwed up.

The dive was bad enough already, but he had been stupid enough to add a spin into it.

“Gyah!!”

His vision spun around and an impact ran through his back before he could brace himself. He seemed to have safely landed on the pile of white sand, but that was pure coincidence. The sand was heavy for how fine it was, so it held him in place quite well. Even so, he managed to slide down to the ground.

There he found a girl wrapped in violent electricity.

That brutal living gun turret wore a Tokiwadai Middle School racing swimsuit below a duffel coat that was likely school-issued as well.

“Misaka…”

Badly battered and covered in sand, Kamijou approached the girl on unsteady feet.

She did not even react.

“What the hell are you doing!? Hey, Misaka!!”

When he saw her slowly walk toward a surviving portion of the elevated highway with an arcade coin in hand and her arm raised diagonally upwards, Kamijou wrapped his arms around her to stop her. The orange beam was shifted off target, but it still tore through the broken edge of the elevated highway like it was made of styrofoam.

Kamijou shuddered.

But not at that great power. At the fact that Misaka Mikoto did not even hesitate to pull out another coin even as he held her with all his strength to stop her. And her slender legs had not stopped walking.

“Wait…wait!! It’s over! You ended it!! What more do you hope to accomplish!?”

Misaka Mikoto would not have known Kamijou was here. At the very least, she had not come here because she had known he was here. She had had no way of knowing that. Then was she going around saving people at random with her great firepower like she had during the heat wave? Had she caught wind of the trouble? If so, something was odd. This was different from the reliable but unstable Mikoto who had used the A.A.A.

He sensed killer intent.

Yes. This may have been his first time seeing Misaka Mikoto wield her power for the clear intent of harming someone.

“…after you left?”

The girl’s lips moved a little as Kamijou held her and she buried her face in his chest. He did not sense any of the embarrassment or bashfulness of skin contact with the opposite sex. There was hopelessly cold and heavy anger and hatred in her voice.

“What do you think happened at Tokiwadai after you left?”

“…”

“We drove off that scientist named Kihara Yuiitsu. We defeated those Element things she brought in. But do you know what waited for us after we were worn down by all that? Completely normal people!! With the barricade broken, strangers flooded into the School Garden. And what do you think happened then!?”

He could not answer.

That would have been when he had been recovering in the mall Kamisato had taken him to. And he had thought resolving the heat wave and Elements problem would be the fastest way to help restore order and help everyone.

“They didn’t even glance our way when we were worn down and in need of help.”

But had he been wrong?

Had someone been seeking help from a different direction?

“They looked at the collapsed school building and called it a treasure trove!! They said they could make money off of the drugs and equipment at such a prestigious esper powers development institution. They laughed and said they were only taking what had been denied them when we locked them out and refused to help them!! They said this was their right and that we were getting our just deserts!!”

“Misaka…”

“I did help them. I revealed the existence of the A.A.A. I’d made for myself, I protected everyone in Tokiwadai, and I used what strength I had leftover patrolling outside the School Garden. I didn’t have to do that, but I still did it! But they said I was negligent. They said I didn’t do enough. And so they said they were making up for that… Why do I have to be criticized by people I’ve never even meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeet!!!!!”

Kamijou did not ask anything more.

He simply held the girl’s fragile body tightly in his arms once more.

“I can’t forgive *them*…”

Malicious words left her like she was squeezing water from a sponge. But Kamijou continued listening. He knew she needed to get this off her chest.

“But we don’t even remember who exactly *they* were. They abandoned us like stones on the side of the road and made their way to the collapsed school building. The only image burned into my mind is those cheerfully hopeful backs walking away from us…”

Most likely, it was not any one person’s actions that had driven Misaka Mikoto to despair.

When given 10, they demanded 100. When given 100, they demanded 1000. It was the group psychology that saw that as perfectly normal. They had been infected by the limitless desire of those who intentionally kept themselves in a

lowly position.

She had said she did not remember who the target of her revenge was.

Even if the people behind the looting of Tokiwadai were captured and brought in front of Mikoto, Kamijou was confident she would probably just look confused. This was not that simple. Misaka Mikoto had been faced with the great malice of the extreme environment created by a disaster.

“It’ll be okay…” Kamijou finally spoke as he rubbed the far-too-small girl’s hair. “What you want to defeat might not have physical form, but I promise you we’ll defeat it. Hurting people won’t affect it, but there has to be a way to kill it. So don’t lose your way. It’ll be okay.”

“Really?” asked Mikoto with the wavering voice of a small child. “Is there really a way to defeat that monster?”

“Yes.”

Once order was restored and once they could return to their normal lives again, that malice would have nowhere left. It would vanish from everyone’s hearts. That was when they could tear the formless monster to shreds. They could only trust in that as they continued fighting.

And the former Kamisato Faction centered on Ellen and Maya were using the Spheres to control that monster to a certain extent. And for nothing more than locating Kamijou and Fran and to send their own fighters after them.

Kamijou could not ignore this.

Kamisato Kakeru’s rescue, the girls under Kihara Yuiitsu’s command, and the malice covering the city. It all looked separate at first glance, but they were actually linked, even if unintentionally.

“Work with me, Misaka. I need your help.”

He had to fight.

He had to protect something important from this chain reaction of malice.

“I’ll return everything to normal. I swear it.”

Part 11

They seemed to have taken a long detour.

When Kamijou checked with Fran, it was already 4 PM. The surrounding air had shifted from day to evening, so the biting cold seemed to have grown a level.

“Urp. Hey, Luca…? Why are you all sobered up so soon?”

“I can freely control my subjective age, so breaking down alcohol seems to be a simple task for me.”

The rabbit-ear antennae girl had yet to escape the unfortunate accident of getting drunk off of sterilization alcohol. She was as expressionless as ever, but she would occasionally press her fingers against her temple.

“Hey, Misaka.”

“…”

“Don’t walk so fast. Luca seems fine, but you’re going to leave Fran behind.”

“Why are you picking up random girls again!?”

In her duffel coat and racing swimsuit, Mikoto look back and snapped at him, but her thoughts were actually elsewhere.

(Ehhh? How am I supposed to look him in the eye after he said that and hugged me? What am I supposed to say? What kind of distance am I supposed to keep between us? What am I supposed to do about this!?)

She could tell without a mirror that her face was beet red, but she did not want him to know that redness came from anything other than anger. That left her with two avenues of escape: keep her back to the spiky-haired boy by walking out ahead of him or find a reason to act angry.

However…

“Why are you in such a hurry? Do you really have to use the bathroom or someth-fweah!?”

This time, she did not need to put on an act.

She silenced him with a lightning spear to the torso.

Incidentally, it had not been difficult to borrow the Sphere's key from Show Business's ruler. The girl in boy's clothing was lying unconscious on the wet elevated highway.

The Sphere would be back at their shelter, but that too was easy to find. They only had to shake the crossdressing beauty's shoulders to wake her. They still did not know what kind of esper power she used, but that was not a problem when the first thing she saw upon waking was Misaka Mikoto standing over her while wrapped in electricity.

"Answer our questions."

Those were the magic words. But after seeing the ruler hand over the stick-shaped device in a trembling hand, Kamijou did feel kind of bad about what they were doing here.

And when they arrived at Show Business's shelter itself, they found a large boxy fitness gym. The boys and girls hoping to be the best singers or dancers seemed to treat it like an extracurricular cram school. Most of the members were gone due to the ice age misinformation, so it was only lightly guarded and approaching the Sphere was easy.

"So this will be our new key station…" Luca checked the label of a nearby brown bottle and tossed it to Fran. "It's apparently a turmeric drink. How about you drink it before getting to work?"

"Ew. That sounds bitter…and it is!! I shouldn't have tried it!!"

The hoodie bikini girl stuck out her tongue and held the bottle as far away from her as she could, but Kamijou gave her a puzzled look.

"Is it that bad? It says 'orange flavor'."

"What part of that chemical flavor tastes anything like an orange!? How about you try it!?"

"Wah! Stop, you moron! Should a healthy person really be drinking this!?"

As Kamijou struggled, the racing swimsuit and duffel coat girl next to him could not seem to relax.

(Eh? Wait, but…if they do that, won't it be an indirect kiss? Um…)

“Achoo!!”

She sneezed and a lightning spear flew from her bangs. It was definitely an accident and certainly not a way of preventing an orally spread infection.

But when it was destroyed by the arm Kamijou had lifted overhead, the brown bottle also flew through the air.

“Ubh!!”

The next thing any of them knew, the spiky-haired boy was covered in the color orange.

Mikoto began to tremble.

“That’s not just an indirect kiss… Is that indirectly licking all over his body!?”

“Misaka, is that anything to say in the same tone as someone discovering the entire mansion rotates!?”

Hoodie Bikini Fran inserted the ruler’s key into the 2 meter sphere that had opened like a lotus flower. That gave her authorization.

“?”

Incidentally, Mikoto did not really know who Fran or Luca were. She simply watched the two girls skeptically as they used some odd technical terms and skillfully operated the device.

“Come to think of it, can’t you directly control this thing with your powers, Misaka?”

“Hmm… The outer layer, sure.” Mikoto looked troubled. “But the inner core is a little strange. Is it quantum signals…? No, not quite. But it doesn’t seem to be a processor that uses normal electricity.”

“It is a light splitting processor that uses the Zeeman effect.”

“Fran, stop giving us that smug look and give us an actual explanation. We know you’re the smartest one even if you don’t shoehorn those complicated terms into the conversation.”

“Please stop mocking me. When light-emitting particles enter a magnetic field, their single wavelength will split into multiple ones. That is the Zeeman effect. And when waves collide, they will combine, so by bringing multiple lights together

inside the tiny processor, their amplitudes can represent 0s and 1s for a non-electrical processor."

"Again with the smug look."

"…!! It's a transition machine meant as a stepping stone toward a quantum computer that uses light separately as a wave and a particle! Just like the platypus and the coelacanth or a PDA and PHS, it's a valuable material for achieving further evolution, but is destined to vanish once it loses that special environment!! The end!!!!!!"

Kamijou decided it was for the best not to ask why she knew so much about those signals and computers. She would probably say the messages that "they" send from space are strange and complex. Any further questions would be like asking a cinephile for a recommendation and having them go on all night about some strange poetic French movie.

"That should do it. …Relay processing complete. Now we can use my backpack as the field reporter broadcasting via the new key station."

"So Fran. What's the network like right now?"

The rabbit-ear antennae girl's face clouded over when the feathered pirate hat and eyepatch girl asked that.

"Let's just say it's become a complete mess in the short time since I last saw it. They're still saying the heat wave was caused by powerful microwaves, but now it's split between the theory that it was Karasuma Fran's space station and the theory that it's a countdown to an ice age caused by abnormal solar winds. And both are clearly being backed by someone. I'm betting it's that shut-in ghost Maya."

"She's doing both sides herself?"

"With just the one theory, it can be more obvious someone is guiding it, so she probably wanted a derivative rumor under her control as well. By preparing her own outlet for opposing opinions and guiding people's dissatisfaction there, she won't end up with an uncontrollable flame war on her hands. And it's pretty obvious she's designed them both so they'll cause me trouble if they get popular. She's set things up nicely for herself."

Then someone poked at Kamijou's side.

It was Misaka Mikoto.

“Hey. Hey, wait.”

“What is it?”

“Didn’t she just say something weird? She mentioned Karasuma Fran’s space station and something about ‘causing me trouble’. But, um, isn’t Fran her name…?”

“Oh,” groaned Kamijou.

They had come this far while he tried to figure out where to start, but he could not avoid this if he wanted to rescue Kamisato using the knowledge of Academy City’s science side in addition to the Voodoo time and space magic of the magic side pirate girl.

So he answered.

“You met that Salome girl, right? These two are Fran and Luca. They’re friends of Kamisato Kakeru’s just like Salome. We’re fighting most of their group right now… but it doesn’t change the fact that the heat wave they caused did a lot to protect Academy City from the ferocity of the Elemen-…”

Electricity split the air with a boom.

If Kamijou had not immediately grabbed Mikoto to stop her, the hoodie bikini girl would have become a scorched hunk of meat.

“Let go of me!! You idiot! How can you just accept this with a smile on your face!? They’re the ones that caused all of this…!!!!!”

“I had a feeling this would happen! But I still answered honestly!! And if all they’d done was throw Academy City into turmoil, I wouldn’t be helping them!! It’s complicated, but their heat wave weakened Kihara Yuiitsu’s Elements!!”

Mikoto finally tensed and stopped struggling when he mentioned that scientist’s name.

“Kihara…Yuiitsu…?”

“Yes! The one who attacked your school!! I’ll explain everything, so just calm down!!”

Explaining was anything but easy.

For one thing, Mikoto had not seen or heard anything about who Kamisato

Kakeru was, so getting her to understand the strange environment surrounding the boy would be a large hurdle.

The one piece of luck was that she had met Salome.

Introducing him as “Salome’s brother” seemed to help her accept how unreasonable it all was.

Even so, electricity would occasionally envelop her body like she was flipping the tea table, so Kamijou would have to wrap his arms around the racing swimsuit girl’s waist, knock her to the ground while she blushed, and finish his explanation of the most important aspects.

The heat wave and the Elements were separate.

The flood of Kihara Yuiitsu’s Elements was the real threat and Fran had been forced to respond with the microwaves from her space station to reduce the damage as much as possible.

Mikoto must not have been entirely convinced because she looked away and spoke in a low voice.

“…Well, fine.”

“Bugo. Bububuu. Buhee Bubuu.”

“I didn’t hit your face so much you have to talk like a pig!! B-besides, you’re being far too accepting of all this. When did you just stop caring!?”

“Anyway…”

Despite her life being at fairly serious risk here, Fran’s eyes were as emotionless as ever. It was Luca who had been focused on the cutlass at her waist, but she breathed a sigh of relief now.

“We have the Sphere now, but we have no idea when Ellen or Maya will attack. Also, I would like to be able to make multi-stage attacks by linking the key station with regional stations like they’re doing. If possible, I would like to control more than just the one Sphere.”

“I get that, but we can’t ignore the main Kamisato issue either. I don’t want to take the time to sneak into other shelters.”

“Of course not.”

The hoodie bikini girl pointed at Mikoto's nose with the index finger sticking out of her baggy sleeve.

"So we'll get just one more. Assuming you're willing to introduce us to the shelter you're staying at."

Part 12

With Misaka Mikoto guiding them, they felt much more relaxed in the dead streets that had seemed so dangerous before.

Even so, it was not easy traveling by foot when Academy City was buried in rubble and white sand. The sun had completely set by the time they arrived. When Kamijou asked the hoodie bikini girl, he learned it was already seven. It was truly nighttime.

And Kamijou was surprised to find the high class girls of Tokiwadai Middle School had moved to a familiar place.

"…A hospital? And the one I'm always staying at???"

"A lot of the girls could barely move after fighting Kihara Yuiitsu. After all that, they're lucky to even be alive."

And even though Kamijou and Fran were essentially wanted criminals, time passed in a much more relaxed fashion than they expected.

(What is going on…?)

Kamijou looked around. The high class girl's school had had nearly 200 students, so they must not have all been able to use the hospital beds.

Quite a few objects were visible in the parking lot out front. They were handmade "houses" made from cardboard boxes and blue plastic sheets. Some of the plastic entrances pushed open as girls in racing swimsuits and duffel coats peered out and nodded their way.

The lack of concrete walls to keep out Elements did not really matter. An outdoor base was safe as long as the Elements could be diverted away. The park had shown Kamijou that.

But even so…

“High class girls in cardboard houses? That’s not right at all. Are you sure you can adapt to this?”

“Are you making fun of us?”

Mikoto sounded exasperated, but it was true there was some exhaustion on her face. She had likely been working all out from the beginning. And even though she was smiling on the surface, it was possible she was still feeling the malice that had been directed their way.

However, some of the girls seemed to be enjoying the new experience of this unfamiliar environment.

“The cardboard will collapse with nothing but tape holding it together. Oh, I know. How about we reinforce it with wire hangers?”

“Great idea, Kongou-san!”

“And while we’re at it, let’s strengthen it further with styrofoam!”

They seemed to be enjoying it like children building a secret base. A warm blanket and food always had a way of soothing people’s hearts. With the necessities fulfilled, they may have been trying to expel some of the stress built up in their chests. He just hoped they did not get sick of it as quickly as a cold bath after the sauna.

“Bunny Grey…”

Fran covered her mouth in excitement after finding a cardboard house using a character picnic sheet as a door. Kamijou was fairly certain she would try to move in there permanently, so he grabbed her by the nape of the neck to stop her.

A delicious smell wafted their way and he spotted some girls in the parking lot stirring a large pot sitting atop a metal drum with wire mesh over the top. It likely had curry or something inside. They would not have had the dozens of spices available, so it smelled a lot like the standard roux Kamijou would buy at the supermarket.

Thanks to Mikoto’s influence they were given some on paper plates. There was nowhere to sit, so they stood around the fire as they ate.

The last thing Kamijou and Fran had eaten was the cold duck slices, chikuwa, and naruto they had borrowed from the subway station soba restaurant refrigerator.

Eating something warm and flavorful was almost enough to move them to tears. In this moment, Kamijou Touma was truly alive.

Then an extremely young voice – around 7 years old – spoke up next to him.

“Onee-chan. Um… More!”

“Luca!! Why are you using that visual to take advantage of people’s good will!?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. More importantly…Onee-chan, more!”

But then something unexpected occurred.

Instead of just one or two, a whole crowd of girls in racing swimsuits and duffel coats surrounded the tiny pirate girl.

“My, who is this little girl?”

“Maybe she’s lost.”

“Well, we must look after her until she can get back home! Mhn!!”

“Eh? Wait! Wah, wah, wah, wah!? Wait, wait!!

The young voice was buried by the crowd and the hoodie bikini girl stared into the distance while chewing.

“Heh. In convents where no men are allowed, the nuns’ maternal sides can be so suppressed that they start having strange hallucinations, so they often use wooden baby dolls to rid them of some of those maternal urges. You didn’t know that, Luca?”

Kamijou had no idea why she was so familiar with those hallucinations, but since the rabbit-ear antennae girl specialized in UFOs and aliens, he decided it was best not to ask.

“Curry really uses a lot of water. Both for cooking it and for cooking the rice to go with it.”

“Assuming you just use tap water, yes,” said Mikoto. “But a lot of our girls can control water.”

“…”

“Huh? Why did you stop eating?”

What kind of juices was this curry cooked in!? wondered Kamijou, but he had already eaten it. He had been so moved emotionally that he only now noticed his plate was empty.

“But…”

“?”

“Two meals in one day. Now that I think about it, I’m actually getting enough to eat.”

When he, the hoodie bikini girl, and the pirate hat girl entered the hospital through the outpatient entrance, he found more chaos. In addition to the hospital rooms and examination rooms, the waiting room benches and the wheeled stretchers all had people lying on them and materials were piled up all throughout the hallways. With the heat wave and Elements, the number of patients had far surpassed the hospital’s capacity. It was a miracle it was even still functioning as a hospital. In niche survival guides that gave a timetable from the beginning to the end of a fictional zombie outbreak, it was always the hospitals and police stations that were taken out first. Even if no one meant any harm, the sheer number of people could prevent them from functioning.

“Oh? And just when I thought you hadn’t been hospitalized in a while.”

A familiar frog-faced doctor walked out from the back. It was odd for a healthy high school boy to be familiar with a doctor like this, but that was just how often Kamijou had been saved by him.

But for now, the Sphere was what mattered.

“Doctor, I’ve heard this shelter is known as Hospital.”

“Hm? I never named it, so I’m not sure what to tell you. Maybe someone started calling it that, but I don’t know.”

“What about the Sphere?”

“Oh, that thing? I think it would be better to rely on a radio equipped with a hand-cranked generator.”

He did not seem very attached to it, but that was good news for Kamijou and the girls. Mikoto and the others here did not seem to know that Kamijou and Fran were being treated like wanted criminals, so the entire shelter probably did not rely on the Sphere much. After getting permission from the hospital’s central figure, they received the USB memory key from the frog-faced doctor.

The Sphere was sitting out in the courtyard.

It was not even indoors, so they could tell how little the people cared about it.

Luca assisted Fran as they accessed the information base that was opened like a

lotus flower. Kamijou watched them and asked Mikoto something he was a little curious about.

“How did this hospital keep the Elements out?”

“I don’t know, but they said they used ultrasonic waves. There were a few long skinny things like glass wind chimes set up around the area, so maybe those were luring the Elements away.”

Kamijou shuddered.

Kamisato Kakeru had revealed that the Elements had been using ultrasonic waves to pass data back to Kihara Yuiitsu through the microwaves. The frog-faced doctor had casually reached that level. It was possible he had captured and dissected a few Elements like Tokiwadai had.

Strange people were everywhere in this city.

That may not have been something to say when he regularly ate meals with a grimoire library and a true god, but Kamijou himself had nothing to brag about.

Then a light beep intruded on his thoughts.

“All done. Heh heh. Regional station acquired!”

Fran’s default expressionless look had started to grow smug recently. Was she letting her guard down around Kamijou, or did she want to appear superior to Mikoto? That was hard to say.

“Now I can use two Spheres at once. We can make our own multi-stage attacks, so there’s a lot more we can do in the online battle.”

“I don’t really get it, but…did you say her name was Maya? How many Spheres does she control?”

“I have no proof, but probably more than 15 at the least.”

“Bff!!” spat Kamijou even though he did not really get it. “That’s a hell of a lot more!”

“Let’s ignore the territory controlled by the regional network stations for the time being. If we’re just looking at the online arguments, the actual difference in numbers doesn’t matter too much. There are only three patterns for focusing on an argument: 1 person, 2 people, or 3+ people. Adding in a bunch more people is just a waste of effort, so we don’t need to worry about it.”

“But we only have up to the ‘2 people’ one while Maya can use the ‘3+ people’ one, right?”

“I never said we had an absolute advantage, did I?”

She may have only been saying they had a chance to argue back, which was better than nothing.

They still had to deal with Kamisato, but the problems seemed to be piling up. Kamijou slowly sighed and looked up into the chilly sky, but then he saw a small figure peering down at him from one of the windows. They noticed him and waved.

(That’s Patricia Birdway, right? She doesn’t leave much of an impression because she’s overshadowed by her sister…)

That girl had been infected with the Sample Shoggoth, joined Kamisato’s group, and ultimately had her life saved when the “pieces” of Magic God Nephthys filled the gaps in her body. Seeing her was like seeing a different side to Kamisato Kakeru who had caused so much trouble with his unpredictable actions.

Thinking back, Kamijou had to wonder if Kamisato Kakeru had already been prepared to kill himself to save someone else at that point.

If Kamijou had noticed it sooner, he could have predicted what happened below the Windowless Building and perhaps stopped it.

He nodded up at the girl and then opened his mouth.

“Fran, do you think you can deal with the ice age misinformation?”

“I can’t guarantee it. For one, if I do anything too conspicuous, Maya will detect the relay Sphere I’m using as a key station and have it physically destroyed. Instead of directly rejecting the idea, I’m busy investigating how the rumor is spreading and pretending to agree while remaking it into a different topic from the edges. In other words, it won’t have any immediate effects.”

“You can do that while we walk, right? Anyway, keep at it.”

That said, that route would not stop the riots from spreading.

That meant they had to stop it at the source. If they could prove Kamisato Kakeru could be saved without Kihara Yuiitsu’s World Rejecter, then Maya, Ellen, and the others would have no more reason to fight.

“Let’s get down to business,” began Kamijou. “Misaka. We need the A.A.A. to save Kamisato Kakeru and end all this trouble. And I don’t mean the machine you built; I mean the original it’s based on. Tell us where it is.”

Part 13

It was already past 8 by the time they left the hospital.

And Misaka Mikoto led them to an unexpected place as their breath appeared white in the air.

“District 11?”

“Right. It’s the easternmost district and it’s used as a distribution base for the land routes.”

Misaka Mikoto explained in her racing swimsuit and duffel coat while walking through the streets covered in piles of white sand.

“More than 90% of Academy City’s trash is recycled. Scrap metal is melted down, kitchen garbage is made into compost, etc. But there are some things that just can’t be recycled. Once it’s been reused so often it’s deteriorated, it’s compressed, packed in containers, and sent to the disposal facility for that area.”

“Then it’s in one of those waste containers?” asked Luca in her pirate hat and eyepatch.

“Right,” confirmed Mikoto. “By messing with the shipping schedule a little, one container is forever left in the pile of trash. That’s where I hid the sample parts to the original I found in the disguised armory that night we fought Kihara Yuiitsu.”

It was in that container yard where Kamijou had fought Gremlin’s Thor at the end of the Ichihanaransai. That honestly was not a pleasant memory.

They made a long trek across Academy City. Their destination was on the far end of the city, so when Kamijou asked Fran for the time, he found it had taken them more than three full hours. The date would be changing soon.

The streets looked strange with the streetlights and traffic lights dead.

They knew it was unlikely a car would drive by, but they still felt a slight squeezing at their hearts when they cut across a road while nearly blind.

When they arrived in District 11, they found an SF world where a one-room apartment had thoroughly grown in size. In the darkness, piles of standardized metal boxes created geometric silhouettes. Large gantry cranes would normally be endlessly unloading trucks, but that had all come to a stop. The perishables in the refrigerated containers may have been rotting.

Despite all the materials here, they saw no sign of anyone. Perhaps no one had been able to slip past the heat wave and the Elements to arrive at this isolated district.

“Where’s the container?”

“This way. If the microwaves wiped out the management data, I’ll have to alter the list again after all this is over…”

It was halfway up one of the pyramid-like piles of containers. Mikoto could use the reflection of her electromagnetic waves to scan the terrain and then use magnetism to easily climb the wall, but Kamijou and the others had a harder time of it. He pushed up on Fran’s butt, got down on all fours while Luca’s slender legs stood on his back, and then had the girls pull him up. It was a struggle, but they climbed on up.

“This is it.”

Mikoto arrived first and pointed at a container door with her thumb.

The door only had a padlock with a dial to lock it. That seemed strange for Mikoto who could open any lock with her power. All locks were made to be opened, so it may have been less about security and more about disguising it so it did not stand out.

She did not seem to check the numbers on the lock in the dark. Instead, she unlocked it by directly manipulating its internal parts with her magnetism. Then she placed her hands on the double doors.

Kamijou frowned when he peered inside the thick darkness that did not even allow the moonlight in. Fran held out a small monitor that was connected to her backpack with the kind of curled wires used by home phones. The backlight shined like a glowing lantern and they could finally see inside.

A sinister collection of machinery awaited them inside.

The metal container was too small for the large weapons to fit, so they had been dismantled quite a bit. Kamijou was not an expert in that field, so he could not even imagine what they would have looked like when intact.

Nevertheless, he immediately felt a chill in the pit of his stomach like he had seen a pool of blood. That may have been proof these were deadly weapons. He could feel an indescribable sense of revulsion squeezing at his heart.

But when Misaka Mikoto had seen this, she had apparently decided to use it. That was why she had retrieved it, kept it on hand, improved it, and remade it to her own liking. Kamijou felt a slight thorn there. It was a dangerous scent, like the enchanting pattern on a katana's blade or the tempting aroma of an excellent weapon.

Kamijou, Aogami Pierce, and Fukiyose Seiri would have lost their lives to the Elements if not for Mikoto's A.A.A. It was also their only clue to saving Kamisato. It was all working in their favor, but he could not simply rejoice at its presence.

"What is this…?"

The first one to set foot in the container was Luca, the magician knowledgeable in time and space. Fran also stepped in with the light source, but she mostly seemed to be pursuing her friend's back.

"Isis, Osiris, and Horus… But this is far removed from Egyptian traditions. That which will not obey upon being summoned… Abrahadabra. The upside-down triangle made from the same letters…the curse-reversing charm… I see. The induction of the paranormal using adolescent minds and drugs was taken from the Temple of Thelema. But wait…that would mean…!?"

"Luca, Luca. Um? Are you channeling something?"

"Science and magic? Don't make me laugh! If everything here is true, then there never were two different worlds. A single person's wickedness was only making it look that way!! You can explain the world with a single unified theory!!"

She was clearly acting oddly. It was like a mania, a high, or a trance. As Luca trembled, was she even thinking for herself? Or was she being drawn in by some kind of external power? What could she see as she arched her back? Her body was moving so madly that Kamijou thought he could hear her heartbeat even as far away as he was.

"Eiya."

Then Fran uttered a silly cry and lazily karate chopped the back of the pirate girl's head.

Luca's head shook even more than expected and *then she came back to her senses.* She looked puzzled and shook her head like a wet dog.

"Eh? Huh? What just-…? Why am I-…?"

"Luca. Can we use this or not?"

"O-oh. That's right."

After the confusion of someone who had just woken up, she began observing the machinery once more.

"This is even better than I expected. I just thought it would be something that existed 'here' with us and 'there' with Kamisato-kun, but it already has magical design and symbols worked in."

"What…?"

The pirate girl answered Kamijou's questioning voice with a shrug.

"I don't know what else to tell you. It's disguising itself as science, but the core is full-on magic. It's like seeing Edison's necromancy device. It looks like an energy transfer device that guides power in from a remote location. You know what we're trying to do, right? Create a tunnel and drag Kamisato Kakeru back. …With this, it's more than half finished already. The trick will be how to alter the energy line into something that transports matter."

Now it was Kamijou and Mikoto's turn to exchange a glance.

The #3 frowned and shook her head.

"I-I don't know what you're talking about! All I did was reproduce the black box portion without knowing what it is. And what do you mean by magic? You don't just mean a method of meditation, do you???"

(This is bad… Then has Misaka been getting nosebleeds as the side effect of an esper using magic!?)

He had figured it out, but should he tell her? He would only worry her if he said, "I don't know the details, but you have a disease. However, you won't find a cure at any hospital." And worrying her might even worsen her symptoms. He would need to discuss this with an expert like Index or Othinus.

He kept it in his heart, but they had to keep moving.

Pirate Girl Luca leaned toward Mikoto.

“Hey, hey! Can you start it up? Not the derivative one you apparently have, but this one right here!”

“W-well, yes. But it’s inefficient. This one hasn’t been tuned for me. It’s a lot like trying to dance ballet in someone else’s shoes.”

“That’s fine!! You’re doing something far more incredible than you know. Turn it on and breathe life into the system. That should provide us with a pretty major clue!!”

It was Kamijou that gulped, not Mikoto.

If the A.A.A.’s core was magical in nature and it placed a great burden on an esper like Mikoto, he could not have her use it again and again. She had been fine so far, but that may have been like unwittingly crossing a minefield. Just because she had not stepped on a mine yesterday was no guarantee that she would not do so today.

“Wait a second. You’re a magician, Luca, so can’t you do it yourself? Magic is your field.”

Yes, there would not be a problem if an actual magician touched the A.A.A. The side effects only applied to espers using magic.

But the pirate hat and eyepatch girl shook her head.

“I can’t touch this bizarre thing right away. It might even *bite me*.” She used a meaningful-sounding phrase to argue her case. “I want to investigate after someone who it’s already accepted triggers the ignition and gets the motor running. And we have someone who’s done just that. We can’t measure the risk here, so that’s far safer than trying it out and damaging the gate we’ve found.”

She most likely did not understand the risk.

Luca continued smiling as she answered.

“…”

But that dropped a heavy weight into Kamijou Touma’s stomach.

They could not advance without Misaka Mikoto activating the A.A.A. Without that

they could not save Kamisato Kakeru, they could not free the girls trapped by Kihara Yuiitsu's curse, and they could not rid Academy City of this chaos.

But now that he knew the danger…

"Hm? What's with you?"

Mikoto herself peered up at him from below.

She looked entirely unconcerned. That was the look of a defenseless girl who did not at all understand the risk she bore. Kamijou told himself this was just one time. Those unnatural nosebleeds were certainly concerning, but she had not bled from all over her body and collapsed like Tsuchimikado Motoharu. Then wouldn't she be fine this time too? It was only for a very short time, after all.

Meanwhile, Mikoto casually reached out toward the collection of junk. Was her magnetism pulling it in, *or was it the opposite?* Several pieces of scrap metal wriggled toward her palm in preparation to touch it.

He thought.

He worried.

And he finally squeeze his eyes shut, clenched his teeth, and yet could not make up his mind.

"No, wait, Misa-…!!!???"

She did not wait.

It happened a moment later.

Despite being the most powerful Electromaster, the girl's entire body jerked like she had been struck by lightning.

Part 14

ABRAHADABRA

From that instant on, Kamijou Touma's sense of time may have been malfunctioning.

As time seemed to stretch out infinitely, he heard a watery sound from the depths of the darkness swept away by Fran's backlight. Something was flowing from Misaka Mikoto's mouth as her body arched backwards. Round drops glittered like jewels colored with a unique shade different from both red and black. There was only one answer, but Kamijou's fruitlessly spinning mind could not come up with the word.

The girl's eyes were opened wide.

But not from fear or pain. Why had this happened to her? Her eyes were filled with the confusion of being unable to answer that question.

Mikoto could not support herself with her back arched so sharply, so she slowly collapsed backwards. Kamijou finally reached his hands out.

But he could not reach her.

He could not reach her in time.

A heavy metallic thud rang through the container. Then time returned to normal. The girl lay on her back and her entire body writhed and convulsed. The blood droplets that had spilled from her mouth were pulled down by gravity and sprinkled across the floor. Many red flowers bloomed with a dirty splattering sound.

"Misakaaa

“A curse…?”

Kamijou finally stopped struggling and repeated the word.

He did not know the detailed definition, but the old-fashioned word was clearly from outside the bounds of the science side.

“What do you mean a curse!?”

Part 15

Someone had ankle-length silver hair and wore a thin green surgical gown.

That “human” looked like both a man and a woman, like both an adult and a child, and like both a saint and a sinner. He ever-so-slowly let out a sigh.

That “human” had waited and waited for this moment.

He had done so while Kihara Yuiitsu let the Elements run wild to track down Kamisato Kakeru, and he had done so while powerful microwaves had turned the city into a scorching 55 degree hell to fight those Elements. And he had even set aside the current problems to wait for this moment.

However it had happened, Kihara Yuiitsu had finished off Kamisato Kakeru.

That meant he had to deal with the other one himself for the realization of his plan.

That “human”, Aleister Crowley, had a few pieces of magic viewed as great achievements, but one of those was based on a magic phrase that may have been the most famous in the world.

Abracadabra.

The phrase was well known in the context of mocking those who believed in the occult, but very few people knew it was more often included in magic charms and magic circles than in spoken incantations.

Its effects could be described as a curse reversal.

When an enemy cast a curse, such as the Eye of Horus or an ankh, it would divert it or send it back toward that enemy, so it was widely known as a protective charm.

However, just as all techniques are neither good nor evil, it came down to how the magic was used.

Think of it like light.

If a light-reflecting mirror was curved, it could focus the light on a single point. Then the supposedly harmless sunlight could be used to start fires or even spark a wildfire that covered the entire landscape.

This was the curvature of a curse.

The concept had naturally arisen in all cultures, eastern or western. Someone might have a doll take their place, or someone might divert an enemy's aim by escaping inside a magic circle drawn on the ground.

The curse itself might not be that rare.

There were curses that took undirected resentment or jealousy and used a spell to create an invisible arrowhead or bullet. Countless numbers of those were traveling all around the earth like the high speed connections of the internet.

The "human" did not even need to refine his own magic power.

He did not even need to reveal that he could use magic.

He only had to capture one of the invisible curses flying around like a wireless LAN signal, slightly twist it, and redirect it. Since he was using someone else's curse, there was not even the slightest chance of the curse being traced back to him.

Abracadabra.

That "human" drew out an upside-down triangle with the same letters arranged in a regular fashion.

That magic circle had been widely known since ancient times, but he had found a new interpretation and successfully built it into his own magical system.

The true name he had given the curse-reversal circle said the following: *I supply lightning for thy death.*

It was a truly ironic phrase for the strongest of the Electromasters.

Part 16

“This is similar…”

Pirate Girl Luca spoke while holding Kamijou back.

“The curse eating into her right now is structured very similarly to the A.A.A.! It must have been made by the same person. If I investigate this, I can find the answer. Comparing the two and searching out points in common might help me fully investigate the strange and complex A.A.A.!!”

“But…then what happens to Misaka!?”

There was no answer to that.

No, Luca shook her head while clinging to him.

Yes, that was right.

Luca and Fran’s top priority was Kamisato Kakeru. If they had to weigh that vanished boy against anything else, it was obvious which side would win out. So they had made their choice. Even if another girl had to fall.

“To hell with-…!!!!!!”

He decided to restart it all from the beginning. No matter how much of a detour it was, he could not let them use a sacrifice as a stepping stone.

But then Kamijou Touma saw something.

“…”

As Misaka Mikoto writhed on the floor, she gathered what little strength she had to control just her wildly flailing right hand. She held it out toward Kamijou and clearly showed him her palm.

“…do anything…”

Her bloody lips moved.

In fact, they even formed a definite smile as she whispered.

“You said you would defeat *them*. You said they were formless malice, but that

they could still be defeated. Then keep going. Use me as a stepping stone and continue on. I'll do anything if it's for that!!"

"Misaka!!"

"Keep your promise." Mikoto's voice was heavier than the blood she had coughed up. "I'm not the only one trapped by this. You freed me from it, but everyone else is still trapped! They might be smiling on the outside, but it'll have taken root deep in their hearts!! So defeat *them*. Defeat them and prove it! Show those girls something that makes them glad they were here in Academy City!!"

Kamijou thought he could not do it.

Not that he could not step over her and continue on. He could not give into emotion by rejecting and wasting Mikoto's efforts after she had clenched her teeth and worked so hard to help.

Not matter how long he tried, he could not swing down his trembling fist.

Mikoto smiled kindly up at him while collapsed on her back.

And with that smile on her face, she once more lost control of her body. She writhed irregularly and could not stop convulsing. What was happening beneath her skin? She tossed about like she had swallowed deadly poison.

"How long is it going to take, Luca…?"

"I'm doing it right now."

"When can I save Misaka!? Answer me!!"

"I'm working as hard as I can!!"

The passage of time felt maddeningly slow.

He could not tell how much progress Luca had made as she shut her eyes and muttered below her breath. That made him all the more impatient. Mikoto's writhing and convulsions had grown smaller, but he doubted that meant her condition had grown stable. It only looked like her life force was being sapped away.

How much time had passed?

How far had he worn down his back teeth as he clenched them?

Then Luca's arms relaxed around him. He took that as permission, nearly collapsed onto the floor to approach Mikoto, and forcefully pressed his right palm against the stomach of her racing swimsuit.

There was no reaction.

He did not actually know if the external curse had ended.

And he had to have known how this would end if he let those girls make the decisions. He had known, but he had let it happen. It was the same as when Kamisato had disappeared. He had been pushed back by the claims that this was the best option and he had ultimately done nothing.

"Dammit…"

Kamijou groaned as he held that small and limp body in his arms.

No one had done anything wrong.

Everyone had made the best available choice, yet this had happened.

"Goddammiii

He was in the middle of a giant intersection with no people or cars to be seen. Curtains, a bed, scraps of cloth, and other things were piled up and burning as an impressive bonfire. The girl in the modified mini-China dress was hopping around as she pleased and the bandaged woman seemed unconcerned by how she was dressed, so it was hard to know where to look even for Kamisato who was always surrounded by girls. He kept seeing butts.

This place was cut off from the normal world, but destroying things was easy. Kamisato had initially paled when he thought it would influence things back in the original world, but the Magic Gods said that was not how it worked.

They could destroy things, but it would not affect anything “there”.

And at the end of the day, all traces of the damage would be repaired at precisely midnight. But instead of returning to how it was before the damage, the world was remade based on things “there”. Simply put, if they chopped down a roadside tree but it was replanted one spot over in “that world”, it would pop up in that next spot over once midnight arrived in “this world”.

Only those selfish Magic Gods would rejoice at being able to do whatever they wanted upon hearing that. If all traces would vanish, then they had a world where nothing they did would remain. This world did not allow for the accumulation that was the key to human progress. And since it was all based on “that world”, they would be able to see a desert forming or an ice age coming, but they could do nothing to stop it. They could only watch the ruin spread and be buried by it.

What happened to the nutrients from the sliced potatoes he was eating now? Did the update come at midnight because the repairs swept across the surface of the earth in accordance with its rotation? He had a never-ending stream of thoughts on the matter, but he did not need to rush. He had more time to think than he could ever ask for.

“This stuff is pretty good now that I’ve tried it. Chomp, chomp.”

“Oh, dear. And here I thought not even you people would eat a table, even if it has four legs.”

The gods who hated causing change were entirely carefree. If they were tasked with stacking rocks for eternity in the Sai no Kawara, it would likely be the tormenting demons meant to obstruct their work that begged for it to end.

“Made up your mind?” asked Magic God Niang-Niang.

“It’s not like I have a choice when I can’t return ‘there’.”

“Oh? So you’re gonna die?”

“…”

She made it sound so trivial. She handled life and death matters like she was talking to a villager in an RPG.

“But, y’know…?”

Despite wearing a miniskirt, pale Niang-Niang stood on one leg, bent backwards, and stretched her other leg toward heaven like she was copying a ballet pose. This dangerously emphasized her chest and slender legs. Gods were magnanimous, so after blowing off some steam, she did not particularly care if someone was an enemy or ally.

“Is returning to the original world really that hard?”

“Come to think of it, you summoned Nuada’s left arm from empty air. I don’t remember us giving it that ability, but maybe you could pull it off if you had World Rejecter itself.”

Kamisato sighed and spun the fork in his left hand.

He noticed the number of forks had grown to two or three at some point.

“For gods, you’re not very observant. Just because someone has a paranormal power that surpasses human understanding doesn’t mean everything they do uses it.”

“Oh, so it was a bluff?”

“I was in it for revenge, so I was afraid killing you instantly would leave me unsatisfied. I studied and worked hard so I could savor it for as long as possible. And as a normal high school boy, I was also interested in a way to hide a weapon just in case.”

He of course kept it a secret that he had thought it would look cool pulling a knife or gun from his sleeve like an assassin in a movie. The kind of person who spent time in class thinking what he would do if terrorists attacked his school would often fantasize about such things. Whether or not that person would actually walk down to the library and check out the magic tricks book recommended by literary and gardening girl Claire was another matter.

But Niang-Niang was not normal or in high school, so she went beyond hiding something up her sleeve and had instead replaced all ten of her fingers with Pao-

Pei. She hid her mouth with her baggy sleeve and smiled.

“I do know how you feel. We Magic Gods are a lot like that. When you get down to it, legends are more about style than function, right? If they would just get the help of the gods right away, they wouldn’t have any trouble at all, but they go out of their way to overcome it all with their own power.”

“Please don’t act like I’m anything like you.”

“Then one more thing.”

Niang-Niang gave a smile of clear malice as she bent her lithe body. It was unclear how she was supporting her weight, but she formed a perfect bridge without placing her hands on the ground and she looked at him with her upside-down head.

“Did you think your story was over now?”

“?”

“You’re really not much fun, so we’ll help you return to your original world. Are you saying you don’t care if that succeeds or fails? Was your story over once your valiant decision got you sent here, so nothing you do here matters?”

He had no obligation to respond, but his expression was enough of an answer.

He did not bite. He did not look at the Magic God’s face, choose his words, and try to determine the truth of what she was saying. He should have been panicking, flustered, and an embarrassment. Even if this was salt sent by his enemy, he should have been hesitantly reaching his tongue toward it despite the possibility of poison.

But he did not.

He chose not to.

“Even when people die, they leave something behind.” Niang-Niang spoke in a know-it-all tone. “A forgotten god like me might have no connections left, but you’re far too fresh in that way. The world is too fresh to you. So things might be taking a biiiiit of a turn for the worse back in ‘that world’.”

“…What are you trying to say?”

“Let’s put it like this.”

The Shijie Xian smirked as her bridge pose showed off her alluring curves through the opening in the dress's chest, the slits at the hips, and across the rest of her body.

She was someone who had taken her own life to strip away the impurity of a worldly life and become a Xian.

Such beings were proper Xians, but they were also sometimes feared as vampiric monsters.

Or perhaps the beauty of her body was like food made to look and taste just like human flesh or a ghost painting made with real blood. It may have had that forbidden fascination that told you that you must not look at it or do it, but the twisted curiosity led you to cross the final line regardless.

"You might think you haven't left anything at all behind, but things back there might be a complete mess. The High Priest looked like an old man, but he was the young one among us. Nephthys and I spent about 4000 years until we achieved the title of a forgotten god that won't make any waves. We lived through the Four Great Civilizations to accomplish it. But you haven't even lived for two decades, so I seriously doubt you could leave the world without causing any trouble for anyone."

"What are you saying…?"

There was a clear implication there. No, given who she was, perhaps it should be called a divine message.

And if what he had done had influenced those girls in some way, he could not just ignore this.

But before he could ask for details, something else happened.

It started with long silver hair and brown skin. Magic God Nephthys's bandage-wrapped body was a little too alluringly fascinating to call healthy and she spoke with some slight caution on her voice.

"Niang-Niang."

"What is it?"

"Here they come."

Those two were true Magic Gods. So who in this isolated timeline could concern them?

Kamisato thought for a moment and could only come up with one answer.

The world shook. It was a one-armed man with tattoos covering his bare upper body.

He was Magic God Nuada.

He was the king of gods spoken of in Celtic tradition.

He had been driven from his throne after losing his arm, but with the help of the god of healing, he had made a comeback.

And after that success, he had severed his own arm as a test of courage. He had then crawled back up from that to overcome the trial toward becoming king of all things.

“Shall we begin?”

“Why are you bothering to speak in Japanese, Nuada-chaaan? …Are you trying to scare Kamisato Kakeru???”

“I would like to begin the 2nd round.”

He did not bat an eye at her cheap provocation.

The atmosphere around the mini-China dress Xian also changed. By not smiling, Nuada had abandoned the final line. He had sent off the last train himself.

There was no getting off now.

“But why would you do that?”

“The die is cast.”

He spoke only that one phrase.

He did bother commenting on what the result would mean. He made it sound like he would be tearing off someone’s limbs and dragging out their entrails just because that was on the schedule for the day.

“Gods are so impatient,” said Niang-Niang.

“Are we? I’d say we’re still rational enough since we at least make sure to construct a reason for our actions.”

When he heard that answer, Kamisato looked around.

There were more.

They were on the building rooftops, underneath the cars, and blending into the shadows in the alleys. He was only a human with his right hand lost, but he could still sense the multiple gazes focused on them from all directions.

It was true a lot of the Magic Gods probably wanted to take their time to slowly crush Kamisato Kakeru's body. Niang-Niang had said none of them held a grudge, but that was only her opinion. Based on what had happened, there could easily be some gods who wanted revenge…no, who wanted to punish the insolent human.

"Then why did you wait until now to cast the die?" asked an exasperated Nephthys.

"If I had to say…" The god of war twisted his lips as he brought the concept of cruelty into this world. "Because we cannot take anything from him unless we give it to him first. We poked at him a little earlier, but he didn't really react. Niang-Niang, Nephthys. In that sense, you two did quite well. This is really where goddesses shine. Now the leather sack appears to be filled with something worth striking and crushing."

"Sigh."

Niang-Niang sighed as she looked to Nephthys instead of Nuada and the other Magic Gods.

"What should we do?"

"Well, I'm the goddess associated with the crying woman who weeps at funerals. It does kiiiind of piss me off to trample on an action where death is at stake."

"No, no. I'm not talking about anything on that level."

"Perhaps not. Or…"

As Nuada frowned at them, the two goddesses pressed their palms against the other's, pressed their cheeks together, smiled, and spoke in unison.

"Nothing excites a god more than holding a fragile human's destiny in your hands☆"

"Nothing excites a god more than holding a fragile human's destiny in your

hands☆”

A massive explosion followed.

And before the shockwave and expanding dust could reach Kamisato, Bandaged Nephthys wrapped her arms around him and jumped backwards. Niang-Niang smiled as she also jumped back with the bottom of her mini-China dress rising dangerously high.

“Ha ha haaa!! If it’s started, then we’ll just have to go for it! You clench your teeth too, Kamisato Kakeru!”

“Eh? Eh? Wha-…?”

“Here they come!! The true Magic Gods are coming for you!!”

Just as she proclaimed her delight in this endless hell of combat in an empty world, something sliced through the dust.

A colossal cube flew out. It was too wide for the empty road, so the surrounding buildings were crushed at the base while it rolled along. Kamisato just barely managed to link it to something said before.

“The die…is cast…?”

The modified mini-China dress Shijie Xian responded by grabbing the skin near her left wrist with her right fingers.

No, that was a string. And when she yanked it back, an engine-like rumbling came from her body.

A total of five rapidly spinning chainsaws stuck out of her baggy sleeve. Those weapons were far too deadly to think of as extensions to her fingernails and she used them to mercilessly slice through the giant die trying to crush Kamisato as it landed on the road.

And a moment later…

“Kh?”

An unnatural voice came from Kamisato’s throat as Nephthys held him.

The cube had come apart, but not just due to Niang-Niang’s power. A mass great enough to knock over buildings had been sliced apart and now it collapsed into an avalanche of pieces only a few millimeters across. But he could not relax. Of

course he could not. He had seen what it really was approaching him: bugs.

The maggot-like white bugs had no fangs or legs.

Had billions or even trillions of them formed that giant die that toyed with human life?

“Nee hee hee!!”

Niang-Niang was not concerned. Just as fire seemed to surround her chainsaws, she swept them forward, burned the air, and swept everything away with explosive flames. That one swing of her arm destroyed the entire landscape like the aftermath of a wildfire.

The sea of bugs was forcibly burned away by the immense flames.

“The Darbh-Daol. Are those the bugs that snuck into the gap between the silver arm and the shoulder wound to sap his life force!?”

“Those bugs insolently feasted on divine flesh. My scales are not kind enough to forgive that. If they do not work off what they ate, it would violate equivalent exchange.”

Metal fingertips could be heard snapping.

“Now give up. You cannot escape this place. A filthy criminal like you should know that better than anyone. No matter what might be happening ‘over there’, there is nothing you can do. …Well, I suppose the new owner of the right hand might send a few of the girls here.”

“…———”

A faint scorching feeling on the nape of the neck stimulated Kamisato’s soul.

Then the dust was broken again as a disk larger than a stadium rotated while launching vertically toward the heavens. This may have been a coin toss, but if gravity pulled that back down to earth from more than 1000 meters up, an entire district might become a crater. And he heard multiple sounds up above. This was the same threat as an MIRV that broke apart in midair to drop a multitude of warheads.

But Niang-Niang smiled fiercely as ruin approached from overhead.

“Now this is getting fun…”

A strange sound came from her as her mini-China dress flipped up and dangerously exposed her bare legs.

Swords, spears, and axes jutted out from her other baggy sleeve like writing implements from the top of a pen holder.

“We can go all out without having to worry about the world!! In this isolated world, we don’t have to worry about affecting anyone else!! It’s just so much fun!! Drool!!”

The explosive flames of her burning chainsaws and the slicing of her countless traditional weapons filled the sky in the blink of an eye. The downpour of asteroid-like coins was not allowed to land. They lost their shape, scattered as countless bugs, and had that true form easily burned away.

Meanwhile, Kamisato heard what sounded like trees rustling in a gust of wind. These appeared to be cards made from a great quantity of bugs. One after another, giant guillotines capable of slicing right through a building appeared in the dust.

Niang-Niang pouted her lips and gave her opinion.

“Damn him. He always goes out of his way to use tools not found in his legends. He really is trying to kill you like it’s a gambling game. Although that means surviving it all could be seen as a product of amazing luck.”

“I thought god didn’t play dice.”

“Who was it that said that? Wasn’t it some scientist? Having them say things like that is really just an annoyance for us gods,” calmly commented Nephthys as she carried Kamisato. “More is coming.”

“Yeah, I know!!”

Niang-Niang sounded delighted, but Kamisato was shocked.

Beyond the many buildings, he saw something at the end of his view of the world. It was the color white. The entire surface was filled with pure white from right to left. It was like a sandstorm swallowing up the entire city, but that was not it. This was much smoother and a far less bearable poison for a human. The scent set off prickling warning signs across his skin.

“Would this be Proserpina? When she was taken away to the underworld, wasn’t her mother, the flower goddess, absolutely pissed? I believe she cursed the world so *spring would never come until she retrieved her daughter.*”

“As a form of divine punishment, it’s a similar idea to this country’s Amaterasu.”

“So what is it?” asked Kamisato.

The weapon-covered mini-China dress girl shrugged as she ran.

“It’s the divine punishment that covers the sun and fills the entire world with -60 degree snow and ice. I guess you could call it a planetary-scale artificial ice age spell.”

They had almost casually reached the level of wiping out all human life.

Kamisato had been apathetically letting it all happen, but even he felt a tightening in his chest now.

“What are we supposed to do?”

“Why do you think we’re running around right now?”

The girl was so carefree she sounded on the verge of whistling, but if the white darkness threatening to cover every inch of Academy City was the same as the soot and smoke of all-out nuclear war, then nowhere on the planet would be safe. The Magic Gods could maybe survive the frigid temperatures that had killed off the dinosaurs, but the human body was unfortunately not as sturdy.

But the Magic Gods were thinking on a different scale altogether.

Mini-China Dress Niang-Niang elaborated with annoyance in her voice.

“Kamisato-chan. Do you remember why exactly you came ‘here’?”

“Well…I had to protect everyone from Kihara Yuiitsu’s ‘insurance’, so I erased the rocket boosters that-…”

He trailed off while Nephthys carried him.

He had a bad feeling about this.

“You don’t mean…”

“Neeephthyyys. Help me out here.”

“Fine, then. I will give you a yawn’s worth of tears.”

Then he received the worst possible confirmation of his fears.

He saw the Windowless Building. He had no idea how it worked, but the two Magic Gods casually stepped onto the side of the building and stood horizontally with no concern for gravity.

“Oh, but didn’t this boy destroy the boosters?”

“We just need something to take their place, right?”

The contents of Niang-Niang’s baggy sleeves exploded. She fired flames with tremendous force and they pushed at the Windowless Building until it broke the bonds of gravity. It floated. It flew.

It launched.

The ground below was consumed by the giant cards that toyed with death and the white darkness of an ice age, but the three of them had already been freed from the planet that was filled with ruin in all 360 degrees.

“Kh.”

Kamisato instinctively clung to Nephthys with his left hand, but…

“Ahn. Oh, dear. Is that any way to treat a god?”

“It’s not just my fault that those bandages are coming off here and there.”

He had no idea what Mach number their speed had reached. Nor did he know the temperature or atmospheric pressure. The Magic Gods seemed to be taking care of all those details. Kamisato clung to the side of the giant rocket that continued to fight earth’s gravity. He could breath, he could open his eyes, the air friction did not burn him away, and the massive inertial Gs did not crush his body. He only felt like he was riding a bicycle.

“Funnily enough, we might not have been able to support you like this if you still had World Rejecter,” said Bandaged Nephthys as she held her silver hair against the wind. “A loss is not always a step backwards. It was losing his arm that gave Nuada a dramatic and tumultuous life that ultimately led to gaining new power.”

“…”

Kamisato tried to say something, but then Niang-Niang excitedly interrupted.

“Wow, wow! Nephthys, look straight up!! Ah ha ha!! There’s a gigantic idiot up there!!”

Kamisato looked doubtfully out ahead of the rocket. He realized they would be thrown out into space once they left the atmosphere.

He saw a twinkling star.

No, he had been naïve.

A battle with the Magic Gods was not going to give him even a second of safety.

A spear of light dropped from heaven and toward earth.

It passed right by the rocket as it tried to leave the planet. The Windowless Building could survive a nuclear weapon, but it may have been blown to pieces had it been hit.

“We can’t relax yet, Niang-Niang. That was a test firing to get a baseline. Once the margin of error calculations are done, the next one is coming.”

“Don’t worrrrry☆ Let this god handle it.”

With explosive flames erupting from her baggy sleeves, the mini-China dress girl swung the boosters around as casually as a cheerleader’s pompoms.

The rocket’s trajectory wriggled like a living creature. There was more twinkling in the heavens and more and more pillars of light dropped down to earth, but not one of them hit. They were all just barely avoided.

Nephthys sighed and asked a question.

“Who do you think it is taking a pleasure flight up in orbit?”

“A sun god, the creator of fire, the god who has enough power to create the world but uses it all to mercilessly spread death, and the god who wants nothing more than to make a human sacrifice out of Kamisato Kakeru! Ah ha ha! Of course it’s Tezcatlipoca!!”

“…Tch. Forced sacrifices just don’t sit well with me.”

“Yeah, I guess you would feel that way as a collection of those urged on by a silent pressure to be buried in the pharaoh’s grave. As a heretical Xian who voluntarily took her own life, I’m pretty neutral when it comes to human death.”

Niang-Niang laughed as the bottom of her mini-China dress floated up in the weightlessness.

When Kamisato glanced back down, his throat grew dry.

The blue planet was already frozen pure white with no distinction between land and sea. And as the heavenly spears fell, they created dome-shaped explosions. Based on the scale, those blasts had to be swallowing up not just Academy City but the entire country. He was watching the very geography of the planet changing. If this was not a timeline isolated by World Rejecter, these attacks would have wiped out the human race several times over.

No, that was wrong.

If the entire “world” was their stage in the truest sense of the word, then perhaps it was lucky that the damage from a clash between gods was limited to a single planet.

Kamisato Kakeru was dazed by the unimaginable scale of the battle.

“…What are we supposed to do about this?”

“What do you think we’re in such a rush to do?☆”

Chapter 3: Or Isolation Surpasses a Group – Engage_U.F.O.

Part 1

It was midnight. The date had changed.

But in her burial clothes with bewitchingly exposed cleavage, Maya did not even think about moving away from the Sphere which was opened like a lotus flower. She continued her long-term information warfare with her two partners: the vegetable sticks and a high quality smoothie made from peaches, milk, 100% acacia honey, vanilla extract, and no artificial additives whatsoever.

Ghosts did not sleep.

Sleep was important for the organization of memories and crucial for maintenance of the brain, but that meant nothing to Maya who did not rely on a physical body. Or perhaps the vengeful spirits in most ghost stories were so fixated on a single thing because they could not carry out that maintenance.

She was in District 7's college shelter named Academy.

She would do anything for Kamisato Kakeru. Even obey someone like Kihara Yuiitsu.

"Hm, hm, hm, hmmm."

She hummed quietly while hunched forward. She pulled a piece of yellow paprika cut long and thin from the colorful sticks in the glass cup.

To chase down Kamijou Touma and Karasuma Fran, she was spreading largescale misinformation from her multiple regional stations to cause trouble across Academy City. Once those two were caught in the trouble, they were sure to use some kind of special methods to escape it and she only needed to reveal the traces of that. This kind of information warfare was her specialty, but while in contact with the Sphere, she developed an obsession that ignored efficiency and logic.

The seeds she sowed did not always bloom the way she wanted.

Rumors would change form bit by bit as they were spread from person to person. And once they passed a certain point, they would become something else entirely as if going through a mutation.

And since Maya had a specific objective, she did not want that kind of unordered and uncontrollable change. When the changes passed the acceptable range, she would inject new information to change it back and course correct. But that was not a total overwriting of the data. It was a lot like giving different types of food to an all-consuming amoeba to see which way it grew.

She felt like she was raising a child.

As a bodiless ghost, she may have been treating this like an alternative to that, but she did not delve that far into self-analysis. She was still a ghost. The memory of her death slept somewhere inside her and she knew she must not uncover that.

Currently, there were three major rumors swimming through the city-wide network created between the shelter Spheres.

First, the heat wave was caused by the powerful microwaves sent out by Karasuma Fran's personal space station and that was deeply connected to the Elements that had attacked Academy City.

Second, the heat wave was caused by abnormal solar winds caused by a great distortion in solar activity. The drop from 55 degrees to below 0 would not end and an ice age would soon arrive.

And third, the heat wave and Elements never actually existed. They were all a largescale virtual reality project run by Academy City's leaders.

"What have we here…?"

Maya focused on that last rumor as she shook her long black hair and toyed with the radish stick between her lips like it was a cigarette or a chocolate covered snack.

There were of course countless other smaller topics of discussion, but those would burst like soap bubbles all on their own. Only the virtual reality theory stuck around like a truly stubborn bubble.

It was not exactly large, but it would not pop and disappear on its own.

That ember had a disconcerting presence, like a cigarette butt thrown into a dry mountain forest during winter.

(A multi-station rival channel? Would that be Fran? But it's strange she isn't painting us as the villains…)

She pulled a carrot stick from the cup, pictured the rabbit-ear antennae girl in her mind, and bit through the carrot with her front teeth.

She kind of understood how this sort of rumor could spread so easily.

First, if everything was virtual reality, everyone could stop worrying about all of the previous damage. Instead of working toward recovery, they could just wake up to their normal lives, so it would be an attractive idea.

Second, the theory was helped by the fact that surviving during a heat wave and encountering Elements modeled after mimicry animals sounded like something from a video game.

And finally, Academy City had too many mysteries. No one knew if they had practical technology for virtual reality, but there was a general atmosphere that "this city could pull it off" or "I can totally see them trying that". Also, most of the boys and girls had been helplessly hit by the disasters, so they would want a clear villain to blame. In other words, all responsibility was shifted onto the adults. They might want to shout that this was all due to some strange project and raise their fists to show they had not simply lost.

And what would the spread of this rumor actually accomplish?

Or more specifically, what was in it for Karasuma Fran?

"…Ohhh, I see."

Needless to say, everyone would stop struggling if they truly believed this was all virtual. They would only need to wait until they woke up, so there would be no need to put themselves through any difficult experiences. They might starve to death in a week or two like that, but Useful Spider was moving around outside. Their 48 Hours to Restore Order project was underway. Nearly a full day had passed, so the crucial power, gas, and water infrastructure would be back up in about 24 more hours. The students could survive that long without eating or drinking.

This would stop the simultaneous riots triggered across the city by the baseless rumors.

If that was Fran's top priority, then it was an effective one.

And "it's all virtual" was a quite adaptable. Maya could come up with all sorts of clever stories, but they would all be swallowed up by a single phrase: "But it's all virtual, right?" And since *no one knew the true level of Academy City's technology*, it would be difficult to find evidence to dispute that assertion.

(The biggest flaw is how she's relying on the strangers in Useful Spider to preserve everyone's lives. Isn't she afraid we'll attack Useful Spider and slow down the recovery until that apathetic group starves?)

They could do that, but they did not need to. And in addition to the risk of starvation, it was possible the desperate people would begin an even greater riot once they were convinced this was a virtual world where they could do whatever they wanted. Whether Fran was behind the rumor or not, the virtual reality theory would not be easy to get rid of if it mutated in a negative direction. This could be a good opportunity to drive that group out wherever they were hiding.

(I don't like leaving Salome and the others with that tyrant, so I should probably check on that before deciding.)

She could see the rumors she had created and spread and she could see another rumor that may or may not have been hostile. What kind of artistic transformation would occur when they were linked together? The girl in white burial clothes giggled and traced her slender fingertips across one petal of the Sphere's lotus flower.

And as soon as she did, she heard a voice amplified by a loudspeaker even thought it was past midnight.

"This is Useful Spider. We are now entering Phase 3 of the 48 Hours to Restore Order. We will be collecting any weapons or dangerous objects that could impede the recovery. The threat of the Elements has passed. The aforementioned objects are bound to have a negative influence on your lives and property, so we are using our special authority to temporarily freeze your human rights to collect them."

(Useful-…?)

One of Maya's eyebrows shot up, but she did not have time to turn around.

The chic college building made of heavy bricks was torn apart like it was made of thin Japanese paper.

At first, not even the ghost girl understood what had happened.

When she saw the destruction start at one edge and the materials fly up into the night sky, she finally thought of an iron sheet roof being destroyed by a typhoon or tornado.

Yes.

“A gust…of wind…!?”

As soon as she found the answer, the girl in white burial clothing was blown several dozen meters into the sky. Maya called herself a ghost, but her existence was reliant on the physical objects known as Censers. Those crane fly shaped drones secretly emitted aromas and low-frequency waves too insignificant for a human’s five senses to detect. That would destabilize people’s minds and Maya generally appeared below them.

In other words, there was nothing she could do if the Censers themselves were thrown high into the air.

The ghost girl spun around and around and finally regained her balance at the height of a high-rise building’s rooftop. The will-o’-the-wisp-like phosphorescent drones could still fly. The triangular headdress with a cut that made it look like a heart had shifted out of place and the white burial clothing was falling off in places, so her alluring thighs and surprisingly large breasts were about to slip out. However, bugs and small fish caught in a tornado could apparently be thrown higher than Everest, so she may have been fortunate this was as much as had happened.

But she could not exactly rejoice.

“Oh, honestly. Where did my vegetable sticks and smoothie go!?”

With a dull sound, something large passed through Maya’s head from the side. The device had originally been a 2 meter sphere but had opened like a lotus flower to allow access to the controls. The Sphere had flown as high as she had. Since the Censers had finally stabilized, Maya reached out her translucent arm while floating in midair, but it was no use. Gravity pulled the precision device down toward the late night disaster scene.

Maya’s gaze followed it down and she spotted a strange device.

The Academy shelter was using a college building, but she saw something strange outside the campus. It was a giant cylinder 20-30 meters wide. The flat circular

end was producing a grinding sound while rapidly rotating, so the girl in burial clothing initially though it was a large tunnel boring machine.

But it was not.

(A giant fan…? Is it used for wind tunnel experiments?)

Wind tunnels were the facilities used to test the air resistance of airplanes, high-speed trains, sports cars, and such before actually using them. The artificial wind created by a giant fan or vacuum pump would simulate the air resistance it would meet in use, but the latest generation could apparently simulate the gales(?) needed for the Mach 7 instantaneous wind speeds seen by supersonic fighters or ballistic missiles.

If that was used against a building, a house of straw and a house of brick would meet the same fate. The students of Academy were preparing their handmade defense weapons such as a giant slingshot made from bicycle tire tubes and a metal frame, but it was likely futile. They would have a hard time getting close with that giant fan in front of them and their projectile's ballistic path would be far from stable. In fact, it was possible the wind could send the projectile right back toward the people who had fired it.

The ghost girl placed her hands on her hips and stared down at her crumbling kingdom as she hovered in the moonlight. She had only borrowed that key station after hijacking it, but this was still not fun to watch. She still had a few Spheres in stock since she had been using them as regional stations for her multi-stage attacks, but she doubted Useful Spider was attacking just the one place. If the same thing was happening across Academy City, she could lose all of her Spheres.

It was bad enough having the possibly hostile virtual reality theory growing ominously in the background, so she wanted to avoid being completely cut off from the network.

It did not matter how much the "enemy" knew when they took action.

What mattered was whether or not it would impede with the actions meant to help Kamisato Kakeru. It all came down to that for the girl who clung to the world of the living even after losing her body.

And as her eyes glared brightly from behind her disheveled black hair, the vengeful spirit spoke in a low voice.

"Do you have any idea who you're picking a fight with, you fools?"

Part 2

Kamijou Touma was also soaked with unpleasant sweat as he held Mikoto's limp form in his arms and pressed his back against a building wall.

They had a chance at saving Kamisato Kakeru thanks to Mikoto's sacrifice, but they could not leave her there unconscious. Even if it took a fair amount of time, they had decided to send Mikoto back to the frog doctor's hospital before beginning the ceremony using the A.A.A. in the container yard.

As a high school boy, Kamijou did not normally think about it, but the lack of cars was a problem. They could not call an ambulance and they could not move any of the heavy industry containers.

But something else happened first.

It was just after he, Fran, and Luca had left the pyramids of metal containers in District 11.

The entire scene was swept away by a powerful gust of wind.

The target was a nearby shelter and not Kamijou's group, but it was obvious what would happen if a stray blast hit them.

"Commencing nonlethal suppression. Please set down your weapons and surrender. The threat of the Elements has passed. Useful Spider shall protect your lives and property. There is no more need for you to arm yourselves with weapons and dangerous objects."

"Nonlethal…? Did they just say nonlethal!? They're using giant fans that could blow down reinforced concrete or a small building!!"

"Adult society is all about categorizing things," said Fran. "A hunting slingshot is considered nonlethal and thus does not violate the Swords and Firearms Control Law. Even though it has the word 'hunting' written big on the label."

They were pressed against the corner of a building and winds moving at who knew how many thousands of kph were flying along the road around that corner. Orange sparks flew from a large abandoned truck. Pirate Girl Luca gulped with her clothes stretched to the bursting point after growing to her adult size for more weight against the wind.

“It’s that white sand. The wind is carrying the remains of the Elements and that’s scraping at the metal like a file.”

“Not to mention the lighter cars on the side of the road are flying like leaves. It’s too dangerous to cross the street like this.”

After learning her lesson about getting sand in her clothes, Rabbit-Ear Antennae Fran had zipped her hoodie up all the way to the neck.

As ridiculously large as it was, it was still a fan, so Kamijou watched the timing as it turned back and forth and ran out across the street with Mikoto in his arms when the gust of wind was pointed the other way.

They had no detailed information on the shelter under attack, but they could tell it was as frenzied as a disturbed wasp’s nest despite the late hour. A lot of the students were armed with large water guns with pressurized pumps, but after that heat wave, Kamijou doubted they were armed with equipment that would waste water.

He then recalled how Fran and Luca had tried and spectacularly failed to wash off their bodies with sterilization ethanol.

“Are they combining water guns full of oil or alcohol with a Pyrokinesis esper? That’s pretty damn dangerous when we don’t have a ready supply of water!”

“Maybe their shelter’s name is just Esper.”

Whatever the case, they were outnumbered. Useful Spider used their powerful wind to tear apart the building. Wind and fire was a poor match. Using a flamethrower now could easily fill the air with heat and provide the wind with a temperature measuring in the hundreds or even thousands of degrees. Breathing in that deadly wind would blister the lungs.

Kamijou knew it was hopeless, but he performed a lariat on the neck of a boy who ran around a nearby corner with two water guns in hand. While the shocked shelter warrior struggled to breath, Kamijou dragged him behind the building and yelled into his ear.

“It’s no use! Look, there are people sneaking around out back. Your ruler and his or her aides are escaping on their own! They’re sending the rest of you into an unwinnable battle to keep themselves safe!!”

“My little sister’s in the shelter. She has asthma and can’t run around much, but she has Level 3 Pyrokinesis, so she’s being used as the ignition for our fighting

force! She can't leave with everyone gathered around her like that!!"

"You're kidding, right? You aren't actually Tsuchimikado, are you?"

"Who!?"

"Argh. If you really care about your family, then grab your sister's hand and get the hell out of here. With the pillar of your resistance force gone, everyone with the water guns will be forced to retreat. Betray them all to save them all. If you don't want to regret this, then get going! Hurry!!"

Kamijou slapped the boy's back to send him off and then slowly exhaled with Mikoto still in his arms.

Then he spoke.

"Let's gather the attention of those Spider bastards. Helping the shelter win is a lost cause, so let's focus on giving them a clean loss so they can retreat. That's how we can save their lives."

"I get that, but what exactly do we do?" asked Adult Luca with her clothes stretched tight in places.

Kamijou pointed at her large breasts. No, he pointed at the leather belts emphasizing them like a waitress's suspenders. Needless to say, he was focused on what the belts held: her pirate musket, the skull container of gunpowder, and the bullet case modeled after an arm bone.

"They're hunting the weapons we have. Luca, you don't actually have to fire the gun. Can you detonate the gunpowder to make it sound like gunfire? It can be something as primitive as a mosquito coil, but you should be able to delay the detonation to create a safe decoy."

"I see."

As she responded, the girl in a thick naval coat and bikini reached for the skull container on her belt. She hopped a bit to shake the container at her hip.

"Since the shelter is primarily using flamethrowers, there should be embers all over the place, right?"

They had a plan.

But then a roar much like a large sheet striking the air passed by overhead.

They looked up and saw multiple transport helicopters using thick wires to carry a giant cylindrical device that looked a lot like a tunnel boring machine.

“They’re headed elsewhere,” said Fran.

“Dammit,” cursed Kamijou. “District 11 is that way.”

And given Useful Spider’s current actions, a very troubling possibility came to mind. They were in the process of hunting down all weapons.

“This is bad. If we don’t do anything, they’ll confiscate and scrap the A.A.A.!!”

Part 3

Frigid moonlight fell on one of many high-rise building rooftops.

Overhead, several transport helicopters used wires to carry a large fan known as the Breath of Blessing, but on that rooftop, a thin man in a shabby work uniform faced the ruler of the city.

“How do you do, Board Chairman?”

“…”

“Yes, yes. Don’t worry. I don’t mind at all if you don’t recognize me or remember my name. In fact, just being some faceless person helps me represent the will of all such invisible people.”

This was the pathetic man who had been lifted up as the ruler of Trial in a certain park but was ultimately nearly executed by the very people of that shelter. And that faceless person was hiding nothing. He was not sealing away his true power and he was not deceiving everyone with an act. That such a pathetic man could meet face-to-face with the head of Academy City held great meaning.

This was something Academy City’s #2 had once failed to accomplish, but this perfectly ordinary man had proved it was possible for anyone.

The “human” kept this target in a position where he could be killed at any moment.

“What do you want with this city?”

“Surely someone of your intelligence already knows.” The work uniform man made it sound simple. “I’m not a very useful pawn, so you can’t accomplish much of anything whether you kill me here or do anything else with me. Otherwise, you wouldn’t even be meeting me face-to-face like this. No, I was never thinking of anything as frightening as defying you.”

He was not like Group or Item where bizarre talents gathered. He was even lower than the Hound Dogs or Scavengers who reported directly to the Board of Directors. He was part of an organization that was often sent out to clean up after the Kihara family or someone else made a mess.

“But the thing about history is, none of that really matters. Seemingly trivial things can have surprisingly large effects. If it hadn’t been so hot or it hadn’t rained, they say Nobunaga would have lost his very first battle.”

When making water overflow from a cup, only a fool would turn the faucet on full blast. The clever person would wait until someone else had filled it with water until the surface tension was about to break and then they would put in a single drop themselves. Preparing the environment like that was the only way for an unimportant person to set history in motion.

To repeat, he was just one of the masses. He was a faceless person who no one would remember. Normally, he could never accomplish something that Academy City’s #2 monster had failed at.

Then who was it that had filled the cup full of water?

“This is catastrophe you brought on yourself,” announced the man. “The key to disaster prevention is prediction and avoidance, not recovery after the fact. In that way, your sin was negligence. Someone with your intelligence should have predicted this. Both the appearance of the Elements and the unnatural heat wave used to combat them.”

“…”

“You knew it was coming, but you overlooked it. All for your own goal. Then that is a sin. All I did was place a single drop in the cup you had filled to the brim.”

“I see. In other words…”

“Unlike you, I don’t stand out and I have no grand ambitions. If I had control of the recovery, I could probably build a system to my liking, but wanting that is only

natural. Everyone wants a society in which they need not fear disaster. And to that end, I want to stand in front of the leader who stood idly by and let disaster strike. That's all this is. And there's no real need *for an empty person like me to take that role.*"

"…"

"Boring, isn't it? But that pointless crap can become the crack that ultimately shatters grand ambitions. You should be more aware that it is the great men who build the world, but it is the normal people who gradually distort that world."

Several more helicopters passed by overhead. Those crude hunks of metal would have been defeated in the blink of an eye if water, gas, and electricity still circulated through Academy City like blood, but now several of those devices were carried out to the city.

"Disasters are full of superstition and jinxes. When a powerful earthquake hits, people say the dolphins predicted it and it was the work of an earthquake weapon. When a hurricane hits land, people say it was redirected by a government bombing experiment and it was spreading chemtrail chemicals. Countless rumors will spread as if people want to dramatize the tragic situation."

The Breath of Blessing devices had originally been designed to artificially alter the wind direction and redirect toxic smoke away from densely populated areas when a dangerous chemical fire began in an Academy City laboratory. But the current situation made it clear that nonlethal firefighting usage was only an excuse for the paperwork. And the process that led to that excessively powerful machine's development was exactly what this faceless person had to fight.

"Disaster situations are extremely dangerous, so the people must be disarmed. … That is another superstition with no basis behind it, but no one can shake it. The thing is, Aleister, *we are fighting people like you so we can let go of those things.*"

He had likely said what he wanted to say.

At the very least, that "human" decided he had.

The frigid rooftop echoed with the sound of something wet being crushed.

Aleister did not even bother watching as the remains of a man slowly collapsed backwards without even uttering a scream. There was no more information there. It was impossible to tell with his head thoroughly crushed, but that faceless person had likely been smiling even as a corpse.

Part 4

Adult Luca's black powder had been even more effective than hoped, so Useful Spider's attention had gathered elsewhere long enough for the shelter students to escape safely.

"Dammit, Luca! Did you really have to throw the 'firecracker' there!? They probably captured the ruler and his or her aides who had already escaped!!"

"I'd really prefer you called that a clever plan."

"Yay!"

For some reason, the hoodie bikini girl and the feathered pirate hat and eyepatch girl exchanged a high five. Kamijou really wished he could ask Kamisato how he had scolded these girls.

Several large fans had been carried to District 11 while they secretly assisted the Esper shelter, but there was nothing they could do about that. Even if they had stopped helping and focused on that, they could not have reached the airborne transport helicopters.

Kamijou did his best to find something to be positive about.

"Are they really going to check though the entire container yard?"

"What do you mean?"

He heard the quiet sound of scraping metal. With the wind attack finally over, Fran had unzipped her hoodie again. The bright skin from her flat chest to below her navel came into view. She did not seem aware of the youthful allure she was exuding, so she tilted her head with unreadable eyes.

"They keep talking about the 48 Hours to Restore Order. By the way, Fran, do you know what time it is now?"

"Just before 2 in the morning. A fair bit of time has passed."

"If Useful Spider is serious about that, then they only have about a day left. Meanwhile, it would take months to check through everything in that distribution base's container yard. They'll run right through their limit if they perform a real search."

“Then why did they send a unit to District 11…?”

“If they’re trying to confiscate weapons, they don’t actually have to inspect all the containers. They just have to seal off the entire container yard and keep everyone out. That would take far less time than checking through each and every one of those hundreds or thousands of containers.”

In that case, Kamijou and the girls’ efforts had not been in vain.

In fact, staying in District 11 with the A.A.A. might have left them surrounded by Useful Spider and unable to do anything.

Fran puffed out her soft-looking cheeks.

“But we need that hunk of junk to save Kamisato-chan.”

“I know that.”

They had avoided being surrounded, but now they could not reach the A.A.A. which was the key to rescuing Kamisato. They knew Useful Spider’s firepower all too well after supporting that shelter. They felt like they might be blasted out of the solar system if they faced those things head-on.

But Kamijou had an idea.

“Let’s make an attack of our own.”

“You mean carry a gun into a container yard full of soldiers?” asked Luca who was back to her normal size now that the threat was gone. “Are we supposed to pray for the cavalry to show up???”

Kamijou shook his head.

“No, not that. I don’t know where Useful Spider’s base is, but even they’ll have to call in their other pieces if their king is about to be taken. If we attack their headquarters, the forces out in District 11 will fall back. If we can make them panic like that, a hole should open in their defense of the container yard.

Fran and Luca exchange a glance.

And then they spoke with exasperation in their voices.

“Isn’t that the same thing as saying you’re afraid of the hornet in front of you so you’re going to go destroy the entire hive?”

“It looks like you’re avoiding them, but you’re not actually avoiding anything.”

Yes, no matter what, they could not avoid a fight with Useful Spider. It felt like the entire world was working against Kamisato’s return, but Kamijou and the girls could not back down. That boy had saved their lives and he had asked Kamijou to take care of the girls, so Kamijou could not let Kihara Yuiitsu manipulate them any longer.

But they also had to worry about Mikoto.

They traveled on foot to carry her from eastern District 11 to the hospital in District 7. On the way, they came across some of Useful Spider’s attempts to collect weapons. They would hear the rumbling of buildings being torn down and they would see transport helicopters fly by overhead.

“You can’t save them all.”

“I know that.”

“But you’re still going to try, aren’t you!? I can’t believe you!”

There was not much he could do, but he still called the cornered boys and girls into a back alley, passed them an L-shaped crowbar, told them to climb into a manhole, and otherwise helped them evacuate.

Several times, they saw fortresses crumbling from the winds of the giant fans.

Just like government officials using heavy equipment to tear down the people’s cheap barracks in the name of recovery, the sight demonstrated a disconnect between utility and happiness.

Once the wreckage was cleared and a clean street was built, there would be shiny new shops lined up on either side, but that would distract everyone from how many people had been huddled together and living there.

Kamijou felt more emptiness than he did simple anger.

“Goddamn them.”

The trip took about 3 hours. By the time they arrived at the hospital, the black of the heavens had grown into a purple and orange gradation.

It was just past 5 in the morning.

Mikoto was still fast asleep, so they left her with the frog-faced doctor. Only then

did Kamijou breathe a sigh of relief. He may have had no real reason to relax as he watched Mikoto carted away on a stretcher, but getting her to a specialized medical facility still meant a lot.

He could only trust in that doctor for now.

He wanted to stay here until she woke up. He wanted do that to give himself a secure footing of true relief.

But he could not.

He could not waste the opportunity she had given him.

(Okay…)

He took a deep breath and then let it out.

His mind continued to boil, but it was still manageable. He could keep going. He forced himself to think that and then focused on removing his gaze from the door to the treatment room.

There was something he had to do.

Luca was leaning against the wall and taking a quick nap with her small mouth hanging open and Fran was sitting in hospital hallway while peering at the small screen in her hand.

“This is a hospital. You’re not supposed to use communication equipment.”

“Nn.”

She gave the smallest possible acknowledgment.

Since she kept tugging down the bottom of her hoodie while sitting on the bench, her legs may have been cold and she may not have gotten much sleep. He had heard that cooling off one’s legs would help you stay awake when you had to pull an all-nighter studying.

When Kamijou looked at the screen too, the hoodie bikini girl finally explained.

“I’m checking on the paths of all of the transport helicopters. It looks like most of the shelters were taken out, but the ones without any weapons or that handed them over at the first warning were left untouched.”

Come to think of it, the hospital was fine. That may have been a benefit of using

the glass devices to divert the Elements with supersonic waves instead of fighting them.

“You can tell all that?”

“Don’t underestimate the grassroots reporting network set up between the neutral rulers. Haven’t you heard that civilian apps were capturing the supposedly secret routes of government planes?”

Fran may have known so much about this because there was another reporting network that took a step further and tracked UFOs. Kamijou did not expect much, but she was free to talk about her dreams while looking at the app.

“Any results?”

The hoodie bikini girl manipulated the screen to draw a few straight lines on the map. She had likely gathered and visualized the helicopter sightings nervously sent in by the rulers of shelters across the city. It was a matter of life or death for them too, so they likely wanted as much information as possible about this new concern. There would be no hierarchy and everyone was actively uploading the information.

Not all of them were supporters of Fran who was essentially a wanted criminal. But since the hoodie bikini girl was borrowing other people’s Spheres, he doubted she was using her own name. But her presence as a key station was still slowly growing. Whether neutral or opposed, a lot of rulers would act if she needed it.

The lines on the map were clearly radiating from a single point.

That would be Useful Spider’s headquarters.

“District 21… That’s the mountainous region. There’s a dam and astronomical observatory there.”

“There is a largescale meteorological observatory as well. It has a Doppler radar dome on the top, so it must have thick electromagnetic shielding to protect the staff and equipment from its own powerful microwaves.”

“You mean the giant fans, transport helicopters, and their weapons were hidden there? That would explain why they weren’t destroyed by your heat wave.”

“If Useful Spider was originally established for disaster relief, it makes sense for them to belong to a meteorological observatory that can predict a coming disaster.”

That settled it.

If they attacked there, the excess forces guarding District 11's container yard would fall back to the headquarters. That would be the shortest path to reaching the A.A.A.

"But, but. District 21 and District 11 are far apart," pointed out Fran. "It will take hours to travel from the mountain to the container yard, so won't the commotion have died down by the time we arrive?"

"We don't have to do it in real time, right? We set off a 'firecracker' with a primitive time delay earlier, remember? Since we have Luca who can use gunpowder, let's scare them with an even bigger explosion this time. If we set it up in the mountains, walk back toward the container yard, and then detonate it, we can sneak in while they're out of District 11."

"You can be really cruel."

"I wonder why? Maybe it's because of that movie I saw."

Just like with the analysis of the A.A.A.'s magical symbols and creating the actual spatial distortion tunnel, Pirate Girl Luca was the key to all of this. They needed that girl who was currently napping with her back against the wall, her small mouth hanging open, and drool about to drip out.

Luca woke up at just past 6. She had not even gotten a full hour of sleep. And since they had spent almost a full day walking through the streets filled with rubble and white sand without any preparation, that was not very much.

The real reason she had woken up was the delicious smell wafting through the air.

"Yawwwn… Whaaat? I smell miso soup… But I always eat toast and salad in the morning."

She must have been half asleep still because she muttered below her breath while rubbing her eye with one hand.

And then…

"Wait just a damn second."

"Hm?"

"Did you just open and close that black rose eyepatch? What, so it's a fashion eyepatch? That doesn't affect the path of an artist at all! If you don't have the

courage to truly live the one eyed life, don't wear an eyepatch in the first place!!"

"I'm really not sure what you're so angry about…"

"A fashion eyepatch is as bad as culottes pretending to be a skirt!!"

With water hard to come by in Academy City, the hand wipes given out at convenience stores were surprisingly useful. They were wrapped in plastic bags, so their moisture had not been lost during the heat wave. Their disposable nature was a problem, but with enough of them, Kamijou managed to wash his face.

When they went to the cardboard house area out front to get some food, they found the high class girls were conserving ingredients by eating simpler meals. The main dish was white rice with pork miso soup and the side dish was a few pickled vegetables.

"With this and the curry yesterday, they're using a lot of vegetables. I wonder where they got them from."

"Just like yesterday, I bet they used an esper to freeze them for storage."

"Bfff! Cough, cough!! I forgot all the water here was girl juices!!!!!"

"It's not like they're gathering the moisture from the air around the girls or taking it directly from the girls' bodies, so does that really matter?"

"Why are you more used to Academy City than I am…?"

Kamijou overcame the mental hurdle by interpreting it as "water retrieved with a special method". If he thought of it like well water floating up with Psychokinesis instead of in a bucket, it was not a problem…he hoped.

After Luca finished mechanically moving her mouth, her mind seemed to finally shift into gear, so they began their strategy meeting.

They were attacking the Useful Spider headquarters in the mountains of District 21 to draw the excess forces away from the container yard in District 11. The two districts were far apart, so they would set up a time bomb to detonate by the time they were approaching District 11.

"A timed detonator is a lot like a wire trap in that you can't predict who will notice it before it detonates, but it shouldn't be a problem."

It was 7:30 AM before they left.

They had missed their chance at a nighttime or early morning attack, but they could not wait any longer. Since Useful Spider was fixated on the idea of the 48 Hours to Restore Order, it was unlikely they would search through all of the containers, but there was still a possibility they would suddenly inspect them.

Kamijou's group needed to retrieve the contents as soon as possible.

"So we're on foot again today."

"Fran, how about we make him carry whichever one of us wins a game of rock-paper-scissors?"

"Deal. Let's replay the game every wind turbine we pass."

"Stop that! You don't get to decide that without my input! And I'm definitely not carrying that rabbit alien when she's wearing a giant backpack full of machinery!! What is with all that? Are you an old peddler woman!?"

"I can shrink my body to reduce the weight. What age do you want? 10? 5? How much can you carry?"

"That's not the issue! And if I carry you, I'll touch you with my right hand and you'll return to normal!!"

They left while continuing to argue.

They still did not know if Mikoto would be okay, but they could not stay any longer.

Once they left the hospital grounds, they heard a high-pitched engine. It was lighter than a normal car and more like a scooter, a lawnmower, or a chainsaw. Kamijou's shoulders naturally tensed. The only people with running engines in the powerless city were Useful Spider.

But that guess was wrong.

A few small vehicles passed them by. Instead of men in military-looking uniforms, they were carrying normal boys and girls wearing swimsuits and coats. The vehicles were not cars or motorcycles. They looked like toy carts with an engine attached.

A large helicopter circled overhead.

"To allow people and supplies to travel more smoothly, Useful Spider has begun a motor sharing service. This only applies to Academy City rules and to 50cc AT

carts which are classified the same as mopeds, but if you are interested, feel free to visit one of the 152 cooperating gas stations."

When Kamijou observed their surroundings again, he realized the sounds of engines had returned to the streets of rubble and white sand which had been deadly silent before. He could not completely celebrate this turn of events and it was quite dangerous with the traffic lights still out, but seeing the carts driving through a large intersection was an emotional experience even for a boy who never traveled by car.

In addition to the carts, there were a lot more people walking around than the day before. And they had not been driven out by rioting or suppression. Kamijou even exchanged a nod with an old man out walking his fat dog.

"The recovery is at least making progress."

That should have been obvious, but this was no longer looking like the front for a wicked plot. He could not deny that it was probably a way increasing the entire organization's reputation, but it did not seem like it directly benefited Useful Spider in any way.

Even so, he had to fight them.

Even if they were not trying to, he could not let them steal the original A.A.A. which was the key to rescuing Kamisato.

Still armed with her cutlass and musket, Luca made a suggestion with a mischievous look in her eye.

"I don't like taking help from the enemy, but it wouldn't make sense not to use it, right?"

"?"

"Let's use one of those carts. I'm licensed for anything up to a mid-sized motorcycle."

With that in mind, they visited a nearby gas station, crammed all three of them into a cart the size of a one-person sofa, and set off. That said, Kamijou and Fran were sticking outside of the cart while holding onto the roll bar passing over the driver's seat.

"I'm scared, I'm scared, I'm scared, I'm scared!!"

"Don't worry, I'm taking into account how wide this makes us. You won't get your

head taken off unless there's a roadside tree with a weird branch or a bent signpost."

"You're going too fast!! Aren't you driving at highway speeds here!?"

"We have three people and the engine is 50cc just like a moped, so there's no way it can go that fast. It's just low to the ground, so it feels faster. …Maybe I should lower my apparent age to lighten the load a little."

However, they could not remain too optimistic because the recovery process was still underway in Academy City. There were piles of rubble and white sand all over the place, the sand blown thinly across the road could make it slippery, and the traffic lights were still out. And since they had three people crammed into a single-person cart, it was poorly balanced. Every intersection was a risk and the small tires often screeched and slipped at the curves.

"Sorry, but if I piss myself, it'll get all over you in this position."

"Do that and I really will throw you off!!"

Meanwhile, they left District 7 and approached the mountains of District 21.

"Huh? This isn't the route I took when I came here before."

"You expect me to know my way around Academy City? No matter where we enter the mountain, we'll find the meteorological observatory if we get to the top, right?"

As they climbed the winding road up the mountain, their speed visibly dropped and the lawnmower-like engine screamed in protest, but it somehow managed to conquer the mountain.

"There we go."

Luca stopped the cart at a midway station area that was likely a common point on the way to a number of landmarks: the dam, the astronomical observatory, the campground, etc. There were no other people traveling around here, so the area was deserted. The small shop and snack corner were untouched.

"If we're going to attack, we can't approach with this engine roaring, so we'll have to go on foot from here."

"Brr. The wind is pretty chilly…"

The hoodie bikini girl gave the takoyaki and yakisoba banners a bitter glare, but

there was nothing they could do when the shop was not open.

“We just got some food.”

“It’s already 9. That wasn’t ‘just’.”

According to the map in the parking lot, the meteorological observatory was near the peak. Luca had prioritized safety, so they still had a ways to go.

“A pirate really shouldn’t have to hike through the mountains. Let’s hope that isn’t an ill omen.”

“Uuh…”

“Stop it, Fran,” said Kamijou. “Don’t pout your lips in my direction.”

“Carry me.”

“You’re only worn out because you’re carrying all that crap! Are you going to make *me* pay for your poor choices? Besides, what happened to that UFO balloon of yours!?”

“That is busy with something else right now. So carry me.”

But when Fran clung to him and he forcibly shook her off of him, she sat right smack in the middle of the road and refused to move, so he had no choice but to take emergency measures. With Fran on his back her swollen backpack on her back, they climbed the mountain path like a triple scoop of ice cream.

“Gh!? A-a girl isn’t supposed to be so heavy.”

“Nmh. So warm.”

“W-w-well, that’s good I guess.”

“But this sudden warmth is causing a stirring in my lower stomach…”

“Please no!!”

Carrying a swimsuit girl would normally bring to mind a number of thoughts, such as the chest on his back or the thighs and butt on his hands, but Kamijou was struggling too much to think about anything like that. He learned the hard way the lesson of the Konaki-jiji and the Onbu-obake: People could destroy themselves by acting on emotion and taking on someone else’s burden.

Simply walking up the asphalt road would leave them with nowhere to hide if a car drove down from the meteorological observatory, so they always paid attention to whether there was a convenient thicket around and worked to run through the dangerous areas. Even so, it took a lot longer than walking normally.

“Is that it…?” asked Kamijou.

It was 2 or 3 hours since they had abandoned the cart, so the sun had risen high into the sky.

“Looks like it.”

“Then I’m finally putting you down, Fran.”

In the distant green of the chilly conifer trees, they saw a giant sphere made from flat pentagons or hexagons like a soccer ball. It resembled the antenna on the rabbit-ear antennae girl’s butt. That would be the meteorological observatory. There were a few single-story buildings below it. They were made of whitish reinforced concrete and they would either be lodging facilities for staff or analysis facilities for the data gathered by the Doppler radar.

Pirate Girl Luca peered through a retro collapsible telescope.

“Yeah, they’re there all right. I see some dangerous people with their jackets swelling out unnaturally. We were right not to approach with the engine roaring.”

“But you saw what happened in the city last night. All of those helicopters and giant fans wouldn’t fit in those single-story buildings.”

“Then they must have something underground. That sounds like somewhere the Elements would have attacked, but this is a meteorological observatory complete with radar dome.”

“?”

He was not sure what Fran was trying to say. If he asked her, he expected her to demand he carry her some more in exchange, so he got straight to the point.

“Luca, we don’t have to wipe out Useful Spider. We only have to make them feel threatened enough to gather their other units back here. Do you see anywhere we can attack pretty easily?”

“Wait just a second… There are few storehouses and tanks on the outer edges. We might be able to reach those without going too far in. And it doesn’t look like there’s anyone there, so we wouldn’t have to worry about blowing someone up

and leaving a bad taste in our mouths."

"That settles it then."

They could not exactly approach on the asphalt road, so they climbed up the slope which was reinforced with concrete to prevent falling rocks. Then they entered the forest and slowly approached the grounds of the observatory. It would normally have been impossible to sneak into a fortress protected by security cameras and patrolling guards.

But Luca had spotted a small building outside the fence.

The guards patrolled the fence line, so they only observed this area form there and would not walk out this far. The security cameras were positioned so high that the tree branches were in the way. And even right outside the fence, the forest was quite thick. Any wires or infrared beams would be constantly tripped by wild animals.

"Just to be sure, I sent that into the forest ahead of us, but it didn't trigger any alarms and no one came to check on it."

"Fran, what do you mean by 'that'?"

When Kamijou asked his question, a round unidentified lifeform poked its head through the gaps in the trees. No, it was Fran's UFO balloon.

"Is this what you said it was busy with earlier?"

"There was more to it than that," answered Pirate Girl Luca.

She retrieved a glass cylinder the size of a relay baton that was taped to the side of the low-altitude balloon.

Kamijou caught on when he saw the black powder inside it.

"…So that's your handmade bomb."

"I'd be afraid what would happen in a surprise attack from Ellen and the others if I was carrying it with me. And Fran's balloon won't have machine trouble and crash like some cheap drone."

There seemed to be a few spares just in case, but they left those on the balloon. The balloon would be spotted if it flew high into the sky, so they had Bunny Grey's vehicle wait in the forest.

The small building was made from concrete blocks and the door was kept shut with chains and a lock, but Fran's tool knife came in handy there.

But Kamijou was dumbfounded when they opened the door.

"What the hell? It's full of propane tanks. Did they build up some emergency reserves because the city gas pipes don't reach up here!?"

"That's perfect. This will make some nice big fireworks."

Luca pulled a glass cylinder from her naval coat. It was the one she had retrieved from the balloon before. It was slightly longer and thicker than a relay baton and it was filled with black powder.

"How are you going to time the detonation?"

"If you don't want any trouble getting into college or getting a job, you're better off not knowing."

The girl in a pirate hat and eyepatch stepped into the propane base. She crouched down near the large gray tanks like the ones seen behind a restaurant and she started doing something.

At any rate, this was one location.

They needed to put on an even bigger show if Useful Spider was to mistake it for an enemy attack and call all their units back here. Luckily, there were other small buildings and large tanks outside the fence, so they could circle the fence and set up bombs at the other spots.

But just as Kamijou was thinking that, something hit him from behind.

By the time he realized Fran's small body had tackled him, he had rolled inside the propane base. The girl was unathletic and could not climb onto something higher than her waist, but the overstuffed backpack had given an odd weight to the blow.

"Fran, what-…?"

"Shh."

The rabbit-ear antennae girl softly shut the door with her back to it. She seemed worried that the latch would make a noise.

"Things are oddly noisy outside. They clearly aren't following the previous patrol

pattern."

"Eh? Are you sure they didn't find your balloon in the forest?"

Luca had been crouching down and working with her back to them, but now she was trembling. When Kamijou had fallen, his cheek had hit something noticeably soft even through the naval coat. He was definitely keeping it a secret that it was her round butt, but that did not seem to be her problem.

"…I dropped it."

"Hm?"

"I dropped the bomb. Because you suddenly ran into me from behind."

Perhaps to assist drainage, the floor was gently sloped in one direction and a gutter covered with steel grating ran along the wall.

It had fallen in there.

What had? Why, the relay baton full of black powder of course.

"Lucaaa

cracked it open.

When he peeked out, he found Useful Spider was indeed acting oddly. There was no loud siren like for an air raid, but the area beyond the fence was as frenzied as a disturbed hornet's nest. A lot of the men were reaching inside their swollen jackets and pulling out shiny black objects.

"What? They didn't find us, did they?"

If so, the propane base would be surrounded or Useful Spider would abandon the building and blow it up with a single grenade like in an FPS. Kamijou had to wonder why disaster relief experts were equipped so heavily. Were they also tasked with fighting giant kaiju?

Whatever the case, there was one main point.

"They've upped their security and we don't know their patrol pattern. If we carelessly head out now, we'll be spotted right away," tearfully explained Luca. "But the bomb I dropped in the grating will detonate in two and a half hours. …If we don't figure something out before then, we might all become new stars twinkling in the night sky."

Part 5

"Why?"

A girl's dry and scratchy voice trembled below the Windowless Building.

In the Tyrant's kingdom, one could lose their head if the rustling of their clothes was deemed irritating. Several gazes pleaded her to stop, but Raincoat Salome stared up at Kihara Yuiitsu.

Just as an arm buried in snow for long periods would lose all feeling, the one-armed girl's fear may have faded.

And Yuiitsu readily answered without seeming to give it much thought.

"This is an experiment."

"…?"

“Due to certain circumstances, I must become a unique Kihara that surpasses my teacher. But the problem is how exactly to determine I have surpassed him.”

She was not hoping the girl would understand.

She did not even bother explaining the most basic information.

“The simplest method would be with some monumental achievement, but then what project could no other Kihara hope to achieve? That would be annoyingly difficult.” She shrugged. “But then I found it.”

“Found what?”

“All of you. You are constantly faced with my unreasonable orders, but you are finally starting to work toward avoiding that fear. Just like a cat that falls in the bath will start avoiding anywhere with water. You’ve noticed that the look on my face can free you from that labyrinth of fear, haven’t you? That can also be seen as transplanting Kihara-esque behavior patterns, can’t it? You hate me, fear me, and abhor me more than anyone, but you are gradually growing more like me. By contacting and coming to understand an abnormality like me, you grow to become something similar but not quite like me.”

It was a lot like a famous experiment in which people were divided into a group of guards and a group of prisoners.

When placed in a special environment, people would accept special roles.

The girls felt the fear and pressure of having something more important than their life taken from them if they disobeyed, and that was squeezing at their hearts more oppressively than prison walls.

“The thinly-spread thought patterns that become like my own in order to curry my favor will eventually spread to cover the entirety of Academy City. Just like you fear me specifically, the residents of Academy City will fear you as a group. They will fear the royal guards who have been influenced by the tyrant’s genes. They will fear someone other than me.”

It sounded like a nightmare.

That truth only contained fear and pain and would bring happiness to no one.

“As the process repeats, it will spread like the rings of a baumkuchen or a tree. From Academy City to Tokyo, from Tokyo to Kantou, from Kantou to the Japanese Archipelago, from Japan to…who knows where. The thought patterns of a Kihara will change form like an amoeba and will surely become something that will

surprise even me. As word spreads from person to person, aspects will be lost or exaggerated again and again."[1]

"…"

"In the end, every last person on the planet will be remade into someone who fears the Kiharas but is a part of the Kiharas. You could say it is an experiment that goes beyond a society of mutual surveillance and forms a society of mutual crime. In that society, people will be comfortable dirtying their hands because they know their neighbors are all doing the same thing. The Kihara inside all of you will not be the same as the one inside me. This will endlessly create new Kiharas. Surely that qualifies as a great achievement no other Kihara has ever come close to matching. As long as we are defined as a family of bizarre scientists, no Kihara – not even sensei – can grow beyond being the minority."

She giggled.

"More importantly, if the 6 or 7 billion people on the planet all become Kiharas, not even Aleister's Archetype Controller can reach us. He has the power to divide portions of mankind and pit them against each other as he pleases, but when west and east, northern hemisphere and southern hemisphere, capitalists and socialists, and every other division have the common factor of being Kiharas, we'll all be the same. It is a fear of Kihara that is not quite the same as being unique. It's like being divided yet indivisible. It creates a world where abandoning the Kiharas means to destroy all of mankind. Then no matter how ugly and cruel our actions become, we will have become a bad majority that can never be removed. Yes, it's perfect. Although between good and bad, it's bad, and between like and dislike, it's dislike☆"

Part 6

The bomb was meant as a diversion. The explosion at Useful Spider's headquarters was meant to not kill anyone yet convince them they were under attack and thus needed to call back their other units for defense. That included the ones guarding District 11's container yard where the original A.A.A. slept. Kamijou's group wanted to avoid wasting that.

They also very much wanted to avoid failing to disarm the bomb they set up themselves and being blown up without anyone ever knowing. That would bring

into question why they were even there in the first place. Kamijou wanted to believe he had not been born to meet an end like that.

So they naturally wanted to escape outside as soon as possible, but…

“Dammit. It’s like a giant scramble crossing out there. What are they so afraid of?”

He did not know how many times this made it, but Kamijou clicked his tongue as he observed the scene outside through the cracked door.

Fran was looking at the small screen connected to her backpack by the curly cord of a home phone.

“It’s 2 PM… An hour has passed.”

“Wait, wait, wait. Can’t we turn their attention away from here?”

“You mean fire Luca’s musket, or throw her cutlass out there? Either way, their attention would turn toward where it came from, not where it hit. That would only make this worse.”

“What about your balloon? Didn’t it have spare bombs on it?”

“If I could do that, I already would have. These cheap concrete blocks were forcibly reinforced with a net of steel wires, so it’s deflecting the signal and I can’t contact the balloon.”

She must have felt responsible because Luca continued her attack on the gutter running along the wall of the propane base. She tried getting on all fours and sticking her hand through the metal grating and she tried lifting up the grating itself, but none of it was going well.

“Hey, Luca. You can change your apparent age by controlling your subjective age, right? Why not turn into a little kid for skinnier hands and fingers?”

“I already am, I already am. But that doesn’t seem to be the problem…”

Both girls got down on all fours and tried to get through the metal grating over the gutter. However, Luca had shrunk to age 10 with her clothes staying the same, so her naval coat and swimsuit were falling off in places, making it a dangerous view. It was strange how bright her skin looked.

The cylinder was right there, but none of them could touch it.

Fed up with it all, the hoodie bikini girl finally stood up.

“We have no choice…”

“Fran?”

“That’s using old-fashioned black powder, right? Just like with fireworks, get it damp and it won’t work anymore. Our hands might not reach, but if we pee on it from above, we can kill it!”

“Wait, Fran! Let’s talk about your dignity as a girl before you resolutely squat down there!!”

“Not to mention that it’s covered in glass, so you can’t get it damp from the outside.”

“Kh. Can’t you stick your cutlass through the grating and break it?”

“A shock like that would set it off. It’s kind of a miracle it didn’t burst when I dropped it.”

“I swallowed my shame and resolved myself, so why did you have to make something so unnecessarily perfect, Luca!?”

For some reason, the black rose eyepatch pirate girl averted her gaze. She returned her physical age to normal and repeatedly poked her index fingers together in front of her growing chest. And then the honest idiot confessed.

“B-because you said I was the key to the plan. When you look at me with so much expectation in your eyes, of course I’m going to try extra hard…”

“God, why do you have to go the extra mile at the worst possible time!?”

Luca staggered like the UFO girl had stabbed her, so Kamijou supported her shoulders from behind without even thinking. If he had not, the trembling pirate girl might very well have started crying.

Meanwhile, time passed.

“Let’s make a decision,” began Kamijou. “We can’t get the bomb out of the gutter no matter how hard we try. Staying here will only get us blown up. Nothing we do will change that.”

“Uuh… Someone bury me in some damp dirt far away from anyone else.”

“Don’t get so down, Luca. You did a good job.”

“But if we go outside, Useful Spider will find us and turn us into Swiss cheese. And the more noticeable a diversion we try, the more attention we’ll draw to ourselves.”

“That’s only for visible trouble.”

Kamijou slowly exhaled and then pointed his thumb toward the gray tanks filling the small building.

“Those are full of propane. That’s heavier than air. Let’s move one near the door and send gas out through the crack. Once it’s flowed past the fence, we just need to throw out a spark. Luca.”

“Fwhat?”

“It’s too soon to cry. We need one of your bullets. Fire one shot at the ground past the fence to create a spark and this will probably all work out. So wipe away the tears and snot and face forward.”

“Gas is invisible,” pointed out Fran. “We have no way of knowing how far it has spread. Depending on the terrain and wind direction, it could stay here without flowing toward the observatory, so we might just blow ourselves up.”

“Of course. But if we don’t do anything, there’s a 100% chance that we’ll be blown up along with this building. Which do you want to bet on?”

They were quick to take action.

They freed one of the gray tanks held in place by thick chains and latches, they tilted it diagonally, and they rolled it toward the door along the edge of the cylinder’s bottom. It was about as tall as Fran. Since it was also a thick pressure-resistant container, it was even heavier than it looked.

After getting it near the door, they laid it fully on its side. To more efficiently move the heavy object, Luca had increased her physical age to give herself an adult body that left her clothes tight in places. She pointed the metal opening meant for a hose toward the cracked door and Kamijou slowly turned the valve.

They heard a sinister sound much like a hissing snake.

The invisible danger squeezed at their hearts with a different sort of pressure from an obvious knife or gun.

“D-do you smell a weird scent getting in here?”

“You’re imagining it.”

“Hmm. I can almost smell it…maybe.”

“Stop it, Fran. You’ll trick yourself through self-suggestion.”

If he was being honest, not even Kamijou knew how much gas they were supposed to send out. Too little and it would not work, but too much and it could be too powerful and kill some of the people running around beyond the fence. In fact, the explosion could even blow him and the girls away.

It was all guesswork.

Would someone’s palms be this sweaty if they were thrown into a self-serve gas station in a foreign country where they could not read any of the warnings?

They did not have time to run several smaller experiments to build up experience. With his fingers on the valve, Kamijou spoke to the rabbit-ear antennae girl, the only one who knew the time.

“Fran, how are we doing on time?”

“It’s been half an hour since last time.”

“You’re kidding. So we have less than an hour?”

Lamenting would not solve anything. And with nothing else to go on, he felt like that “one hour mark” was a sign. He turned the valve to cut off the flow of gas and they rolled the tank away from the door. It felt a lot lighter than when they had first struggled with it. He felt a chill run down his spine at the thought that they had overdone it, but there was no redoing it now.

“Luca. Count to 30 and then fire on the ground beyond the fence. The time gap should let the last bit of gas flow away from this building…I think. At the very least, it should be better than firing right away.”

“Will this really be okay…?”

“Either way, your musket is our only hope.”

“Kh.”

“Yeah, you need to learn that flattering Luca like that is a bad idea,” complained

the hoodie bikini girl.

But Kamijou ignored her and changed places with the pirate girl. Perhaps to endure the recoil, her clothes were tight once more.

“(…I get the feeling her swimsuit will burst apart from the recoil if she fires like that.)”

“You can’t hope for that to happen, Fran. We’re on the same side here.”

While standing in front of the cracked door, Luca grabbed the skull container attached to one of the belts she wore like a waitress’s suspenders. She shook it, and removed the cap with just her fingertips. The cap was like those for fabric softener and she used it to measure out enough gunpowder for one shot. She poured the black powder into the musket’s muzzle and compressed it with the thin stick held in the same scabbard as her cutlass.

She also slid a portion of the case shaped like an arm bone to pull out a round bullet like it was a mint tablet. She used the ramrod to push it down as well. From there, she held the gun just like in the movies. The highly varnished stock glistened with an amber light like an old violin as she pressed it against her shoulder, she pressed her cheek against the gun to peer through the sight, and she used her thumb to raise the flint hammer.

She focused on the imaginary line extending from the muzzle and whispered a warning in her college-aged body.

“You should cover your ears.”

Kamijou and Fran moved to obey in the small closed space, but something interrupted.

A large explosion knocked them over.

And that was no exaggeration.

While she stuck her gun out from the cracked door, Luca was struck by the metal door as it swung inwards and she was knocked backwards. Kamijou and Fran were not directly hit by the door, but the explosive noise entering through the doorway echoed off the concrete blocks again and again. The pressure was so great they nearly fainted.

As Fran tearfully curled up on the spot like a turtle, she shouted at the adult pirate girl whose clothes were coming off in places.

“Luca!!”

“No! The timing was off! That explosion wasn’t from the gas!”

The door had been torn from its hinges, so the scene outside was fully visible. The explosion had occurred at one of the single-story buildings further in, not on the ground just past the fence.

Luca lay sexily sprawled out on the ground after being hit by the blast and the musket in her hands was still loaded with bullet and black powder.

“Nn.”

Just as the pirate girl groaned and twisted her body, orange sparks burst from the muzzle with an earsplitting noise. The bullet bounced around the propane base like a pinball, but it was moving too fast to follow with the naked eye. This time, both Kamijou and Fran grabbed at the troublemaker of a pirate girl.

“Are you trying to kill us, you idiot!?”

“This is partly our fault for praising her too much,” said Fran. “A bit of contempt might be the better course of action with her.”

Meanwhile, more and more oddities arrived.

The unexplained explosions continued. A lot of the Useful Spider members were aiming upwards and firing their guns wildly. There was something in the sky, but Kamijou’s group could not tell what while indoors. And with someone else gathering so much attention, they no longer needed the propane.

“Fran, Luca!”

Heading outside when the gunfire and explosions never seemed to end was more frightening than heading home from school in a downpour after lightning struck nearby. But this was their last train back. The situation was far from ideal, but they would not receive another chance.

The three of them made up their minds and headed outside while keeping low to the ground.

Something cut by overhead. They saw an unidentified flying object beyond the rustling tree branches.

“Maya…”

The rabbit-ear antennae girl spoke another girl's name.

"But why now?"

Kamijou did not know if it was true, but that girl claimed to be a ghost. She specialized in aerial surveillance and information warfare and she had caused them a lot of grief through the Spheres.

Had she identified Kamijou's group or was she simply destroying all of the buildings?

They did not have long to think about it.

A large mass fell on the propane base they had been hiding in, so the many gas tanks and their bomb of love both contributed to a massive explosion.

Kamijou was literally thrown three meters when the blast hit his back.

Part 7

They had been looking at it wrong.

Ellen, Maya, and the rest of the former Kamisato Faction had not put together a plan to specifically attack the meteorological observatory at the peak of that District 21 mountain.

They had simply attacked the individual Useful Spider bases around Academy City and pursued them into the mountain when they retreated.

For example, there was the girl cradling a bottle full of old 10 yen coins like it was a baby. She gave a report while smelling black smoke.

“I’m sure you’re piggybacking off of the nearby Spheres, but being able to use radios sure is convenient. This is Elza. I went too far and destroyed them, so we aren’t getting any hints from here. Sorry, but you’ll have to check with someone else.”

For example, there was a girl with countless thick squid or octopus tentacles covered in suckers growing from her back. Her bizarre beauty would drive anyone who saw her mad and she whispered her report.

“Milcah here. I have conquered the broadcast station in District 15. A few of the helicopters got away. You can use the direction in which they fled to work out the location of their headquarters.”

For example, there was a young wife in a swimsuit and apron. She shook the kind of shaker used by bartenders while her flushed face slowly swayed back and forth.

“This is Machina the Elemental Spirits Internal Summoner. I have conquered Bee Hoon Street in District 4. I brought down the giant fan before they could lift it up into the air. Hic. But I didn’t touch the unit that passed by overhead. It looked like they were flying west from District 11. …Myyyy circulation seems really good today. The salamander is running wild in my blood☆”

Fran had found the radiating pattern from the information uploaded through the Spheres, but these girls took a more direct route toward working out their

enemy's lair.

And they did not spend a long time preparing before making their attack. As the "modern" weapons obsessed girl (in other words, she was never too fixated on any one thing and continued updating her repertoire as time passed) Aileen moved the pieces on the game board, everything moved to match.

First, Ghost Girl Maya, whose existence was supported by the Censer drones, and Cosplay Girl Olivia, who flew through the sky on a magic wand equipped with a jet engine, bombed the headquarters as the first wave. Next, Killer Patissier Berry and Athlete Soldier Lemon arrived close enough on the ground to throw sugar javelins and hammer throw hammers along parabolic arcs that rained down on the headquarters. The explosions and shockwaves hid Mary's wolf-like approach on all fours through the forest and Lime's approach on a giant mechanical lizard. Before Useful Spider could fight back, they had trampled the fence around the observatory's grounds and charged on in.

"Watch out for the Doppler radar. If they've cut the limiter and upped its output, it quickly becomes an anti-air electromagnetic weapon. It's like a weaker version of Fran's station, so focus on destroying it first."

No one knew if this was really the right thing to do. For one thing, what qualified as "the right thing to do" in a military operation differed from country to country. This was a collection of obsessed girls who had essentially taken only the most attractive bits of each country's standardized military. They were something like a theoretical "perfect fighter jet", so it was uncertain if they would be of any practical use. The only reason it had not all fallen apart by this point was due to the great strength of the strange powers and abilities of the former Kamisato Faction's 100 girls. Even if their commands did not quite match the situation before their eyes, they would each trample the enemy regardless.

Why had the former Kamisato Faction changed targets and started hunting down Useful Spider now?

"We want to use our information media to its fullest to hunt down Kamijou Touma, Karasuma Fran, and Toyama Luca who is something of a gray zone, but we can't exactly do that with the shelter Sphere's blown away," whispered tall Maya as she circled through the sky along with her crane fly shaped drones. "Plus, we can't rely on the Spheres when they were set up by Useful Spider to make the rulers feel like they had some power. I should have realized it sooner and cut it off at the source."

Kihara Yuiitsu had not directly given them this target, but that no longer mattered.

Useful Spider was interfering with their search for Kamijou and thus threatened Kamisato, so they were an enemy. They needed to be eliminated.

At this height and speed, it was unlikely her voice could reach anyone. Even if she had a radio, her head was entirely exposed, so the blowing of the wind would get in the way.

But the unlikely happened. A late-night anime heroine was flying alongside her too close to even call it acrobatic. However, Maya was fairly certain the real heroine had not used a handmade jet engine.

The violently live action version of Magical Powered Kanamin spoke.

“Keep an eye on things down below. They’re going to recover from the shock soon, so it’s time for the boss round with some monstrous Academy City weapon they’ve been hiding underground.”

The ghost girl with bewitchingly exposed cleavage gave a derisive snort.

Without a physical body, she was not afraid of bullets. No one would feel any tension when playing a bullet hell game while using a cheat code to reduce their hitbox to zero pixels.

A dull explosion rose from the surface.

The dome-shaped radar facility had been successfully bombed. Now there was no risk of the will-o’-the-wisp-like drones being fried.

And so she uttered a single singsong word.

“Perfect.”

Part 8

Kamijou had so much trouble breathing he could not even pass out.

He clung to a nearby tree trunk, wrinkled his brow, and forced his vision to recover as it flashed in and out like a dying fluorescent light. Pain passed from one temple to the other, but he could do nothing about it but clench his teeth.

When he somehow managed to gather strength in his legs and look around, he saw Pirate Girl Luca sprawled out on the ground and groaning. Due to the full backpack on her back, Fran had her butt sticking up toward heaven like someone who had been hit by a German suplex while upside down. She looked like the end result of a robot model designed with no thought given to the center of gravity.

“Hey, are you both alive…? I’m only borrowing you, so don’t die before I get you back to Kamisato. I don’t want to be indebted to him.”

That had a dramatic effect.

The name Kamisato was like brandy to someone lost in a snowy mountain, so the girls shook their woozy heads and forced their eyes open.

The explosions had not let up.

And the situation was no longer unilaterally moving in the former Kamisato Faction’s favor. Those giant fans that resembled tunnel boring machines had appeared and large helicopters with heavy machineguns sticking out of the side cargo doors were pursuing the ghost and cosplayer in the sky.

Fran was kicking her feet wildly while upside down, so Kamijou helped her up and spat out an irritated comment.

“I’m not sure which side are the true monsters. Anyway, let’s get out of here.”

Needless to say, their goal had been to get the Useful Spider unit in District 11 to fall back to the headquarters so they could get to the A.A.A. inside the container yard. There was no point in continuing the fight against Useful Spider here. And there was no guarantee that the former Kamisato Faction would not find them here.

They could not lose sight of the situation. Neither side winning here would bring back Kamisato Kakeru. If they poured their energy into the wrong thing, they would lose their chance at success.

“Fortunately, the former Kamisato Faction and Useful Spider are so busy fighting that they haven’t noticed us. And with this many explosions, the unit in District 11 is sure to be scrambled. Let’s get back to the cart and head to the container yard. And then…”

But Kamijou Touma should have known better than to say “fortunately”.

In case he had forgotten, misfortune was his constant companion.

“?”

Fran noticed something and looked to her feet. Kamijou and Luca followed her gaze.

Several strange cracks ran through the dirt.

“Wait…”

After an explosion large enough to shake the entire observatory, the ground below their feet seemed to reach its limit. It crumbled away and they were swallowed up.

“Owaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

Yes, hadn’t Fran and Luca mentioned that Useful Spider may have been storing their next-generation weapons in an underground facility covered in thick electromagnetic shielding?

Part 9

“Hmm?”

Tracer Ellen tilted her head while dragging her baggy lab coat behind her.

She crouched down and focused on the ground.

“Hmmm…???”

“What are you doing?” asked “modern” weapons obsessed Aileen. “Wasn’t most of your inspection kit destroyed by Fran’s heat wave?”

But Ellen’s curiosity did not wane.

“It is true I specialize in gas chromatography and carbon dating using cutting-edge equipment. I’m well aware that my forensics skills don’t work without the equipment.”

She formed Ls with the thumb and forefinger of both hands and created

something like a picture frame to focus on the ordinary-looking ground.

“But did you know that human senses are a type of inspection equipment? It can be a perfumer’s nose or a convenience store bento researcher’s tongue. When you create a system using senses more delicate than any machine, it’s known as sensory analysis.”

“What about it?”

“And I’m not just talking about perfect pitch. My senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch are all perfect sensory analysis devices that provide readings I can express numerically. Although if I don’t intentionally keep my mind in a lower gear, the world grows very boring very fast.”

Someone had pulled that girl up out of that gray bog. He had shown her a color that she could not express numerically with any of her senses. She believed that was the color of love.

She would do anything for him. She would eliminate even the smallest risk to him.

“Maya, Olivia, and the rest of aerial group. Our radios might be jammed before we have further orders for you and any gestured commands might be spied on. Follow the timetable we set up in advance.”

The hand in Ellen’s baggy sleeve held a radio they had stolen from their enemy.

She based this on her digitized senses as a tracer.

“Fran will be there. That threat to Kamisato-han spends all year staring at the stars and chasing unidentified flying objects. You should assume she will detect your radio waves and the slightest flash of light. Also…”

Her lips continued to whisper.

She was not done yet.

“Something seemed off when I spoke with Fran before. I tried to suppress my doubts because I thought we were friends, but there’s no more need for that. And now that I look back, there was a lot odd about her.”

“?”

“For example, why could I detect the scent of aldosterone and cortisol in her sweat when she would speak with Kamisato-han? Why was she releasing stress-related adrenocorticotropic hormone? There is a massive bombshell hiding there.

I’m not going to hold back, Fran.”

Part 10

Everything had been a complete mess.

Ever since the former Kamisato Faction showed up, nothing they did felt like their own decision. They could only sit idly by while other people made their decisions for them.

Some things truly could not be helped.

Kamijou and the others had fallen into a space supported by countless steel beams like a school gym or an airport hangar. While lying on his back, Kamijou shuddered at the distance to the ceiling. He did not know what had cushioned his fall, but he was amazed he had survived.

“Fran, Luca…”

After shaking his head and getting up, he saw a few metal objects crushed by rubble. Some were the half-trucks with mechanical legs and treads, some were short and stout transport helicopters, and others were the giant fans. Each of them was enough of a threat, but a veritable parade of them was lined up here. The original lights may have been insufficient because he could not see all the way to the back.

And this was no time to stare all the way back there.

Men in work uniforms were giving them surprised looks from quite close by. When they realized it was not just inorganic rubble that had fallen, they quickly reached into their coats, but…

“!! It’s gonna blow!!”

Kamijou raised his voice, placed his hands protectively over his head, and dove down onto the ground, so the men looked around in shock. The presence of the crushed and sparking helicopters increased the squeezing in their chests.

Then Luca ran out from behind a nearby pile of rubble. With the men focused elsewhere, she attacked them head-on with her cutlass and musket. She used

them as blunt weapons instead of a blade and a gun. The sight was a sad history lesson in how, at close range, it was faster to just hit someone than to take the time to load the powder and bullet.

The first was caught completely off guard and knocked out in a single blow.

“Damn you!”

The rest drew long knives and attacked from multiple directions.

“Whoops.”

“!?”

After her cheerful voice, the men were overcome with confusion.

They did not feel the flesh and blood they expected their knives to hit. In fact, their target had entirely vanished. But their confusion was natural. Luca could freely manipulate her subjective age, so she could change the apparent age of her body. She had instantly lowered her age from 15 to 10, so her limbs and body shrank and her enemy would need to adjust their aim.

After slipping below the storm of blades, the small body grew until the swimsuit nearly burst from within.

She used her long limbs and greater body weight to knock out the confused men with the back of her cutlass and the stock of her musket.

“Fear not. I used the back of my blade.”

“Luca, I hate to interrupt your triumphant pose there, but your swimsuit bottom is slipping down. Hurry up and pull it up.”

“Oops.”

After eliminating the threat, Luca fixed her swimsuit, returned her body to normal, and spun the two long weapons around like she was juggling them.

“Nice job distracting them. You’d make a good pirate.”

“I don’t think that’s a compliment.”

Fran crouched down, took one of the unconscious men’s guns, and held it awkwardly, but Kamijou put a stop to that. People pulled the trigger easily enough in movies, but that clearly was not something he could leave with a girl

who was shutting one eye and attempting to peer down the barrel. He was afraid she would accidentally shoot him in the back.

“Anyway, where’s the exit?”

They did not know where a stairway or elevator might be, the exit might have some kind of security lock, and it could have been blocked by the earlier collapse. They had no real reason to fight, so they wanted to leave as soon as possible, but the situation did not allow for it. Kamijou was always experiencing misfortune, but he was beginning to suspect Kamisato had something similar.

They did not know where someone could be hiding as they cut across a space as large as a schoolyard. They assumed an exit would be along the wall, so they moved to the wall and continued back from there.

It was generally the same as going on a rampage in a parking lot full of cars. They used the half-trucks and helicopters as shields, checked around and made sure no one dangerous was hiding behind cover, and then moved to the next shield.

Meanwhile, Kamijou and Luca heard a small sound as they moved out ahead. They looked back to find Rabbit-Ear Antennae Fran focused on her devices.

A voice came from the card-sized screen connected with a curling cord.

“Ksshhh! Fraaan, knowing you, you’ll definitely pick up this signal I’m sending out on a random band.”

(Ellen…?)

The girl sounded confident that Kamijou’s group was in the same area. If that tracer had detected their footprints or caught their scent, it would be a major problem.

Based on everything that had happened via the Spheres, it was obvious what the point of this conversation was.

“(Fran, turn it off! We don’t gain anything from this and she’s trying to provoke us into revealing our location. She might even pick up on the sound of your radio playing her voice!)”

Kamijou had no idea how much it would help, but he naturally started whispering. But Fran did not respond. She was fully focused on the small screen.

“I was oddly curious why you alone would respond differently. Luca’s case isn’t as odd if I view you as the source and her as a secondary infection. When you get

down to it, I think our singularity is you, Karasuma Fran."

She did not want to know, but she felt the need to crush any hint of worry. It may have been the mindset that led people to type their own name into a search engine despite knowing it would lead to nothing good.

"Hey, Fran. Why weren't you captured by Kihara Yuiitsu's…no, Kamisato Kakeru's curse? It wasn't that someone talked you out of it. Your heart was never shaken in the first place. Once I started wondering about that, I just couldn't stop thinking about it. Other things from the past started occurring to me."

"…"

"We know you spend all year chasing after UFOs. Whether that's true or not, you know more about astronomical bodies and electromagnetic waves than any of us. And the station you used to produce Academy City's heat wave is real …But that is a piece of external equipment, so you haven't really shown your own internal 'power', have you?"

No, it was not just the hoodie bikini rabbit-ear antennae girl.

Kamijou and Luca found themselves just as trapped by the sticky and invisible strings. Flipping over this card would accomplish nothing, it would only work against them, and it was a lot like digging up a landmine so it could blow up in their faces, but they could not stop the voice arriving over the device.

"Fraaan," said the tracer. "You're actually a magician, aren't you? And since you're oddly obsessed with a British mascot, you're probably with someone from there. So wouldn't it be reasonable to think you were only pretending to be a scientific UFO girl to monitor Kamisato Kakeru's actions, if not actually guiding him here to Academy City?"

Part 11

Those words were a heavy shock to the chest for Pirate Girl Luca as she listened in.

A spy.

Someone to monitor and control Kamisato Kakeru's actions.

But when she thought about it, it would be odd if no one had put together any kind of countermeasure against someone capable of slaughtering Magic Gods by the dozen. Kamisato himself claimed to be the kind of normal high school boy one could find anywhere, but the people around him would not have been able to see it that way.

And this raised a question about when Luca had been recruited here. Kamijou Touma would not have known who to pick from the former Kamisato Faction, so it would naturally have been Fran's decision.

Then *how had a UFO girl from the science side been able to choose someone as ideal for the job as Luca? How had she known so much about Luca's magic?*

Both questions could be answered if she was a magician too.

"UFOs," muttered the pirate hat and eyepatch girl. "Mysterious lights in the night sky were originally researched as unlucky stars that were seen as ill omens. The idea that they are vehicles piloted by aliens developed and took over in just a few decades, but the same things have been viewed for millennia."

"…"

"Fran, were you that kind of magician? Did you read the future from the stars, seal the twinkling light into talismans and amulets, and draw out that power when you saw fit? Are you from the Golden-style of magic that had its heyday at the beginning of the 20th century and has become a standard by this point!?"

The hoodie bikini rabbit-ear antennae girl did not respond.

There were things that caught Kamijou's attention too. When they had run into the pirate girl in the plaza, the hoodie bikini girl had suggested drawing out a code that only Index and Othinus could understand and then retreating. But what kind of code could "only" Index and Othinus understand? She had drawn a few circles with horizontal and vertical lines along the edges. They had looked like crop circles, but there may have been another way to look at it.

Those had been ancient runes or magic circles.

And the antennae sticking out from her backpack like a sea urchin or a chestnut burr seemed painfully obvious now. They were almost like ugly thorns meant to protect the delicious contents from an external enemy.

Ellen's words continued as if to tear into that soft flesh.

"In that case, we definitely can't leave this to you. Fran, you understand, don't

you? If you were monitoring Kamisato-han's actions and influencing his decisions, then it's hard to say it was the natural course of events for him to arrive in Academy City and meet that cruel fate."

"…"

"Fran, your betrayal killed Kamisato-han. The presence of an outsider like you shattered our age of happiness. I don't know why you did what you did. It's possible you didn't intend to do any of it, but you brought destruction all the same. Whatever excuse you might make, you led Kamisato-han to take action on his fixation with the Magic Gods, you incited Sunny and Rain to action, you created the idea that Academy City was suspicious, and you led everything to this conclusion."

"……"

"We can't leave Kamisato-han's fate with someone as risky as you. No matter what you might think yourself, you may have been set up to sever this last remaining thread of hope."

"……
……"

She had been called a traitor, but she did not argue back.

She looked tiny. The way she peered at the screen in her hand looked like she was hanging her head and she showed no sign of life for several minutes. She was a withered tree. A standing husk. Luca was dumbfounded by the truly unexpected shock, but this girl's downfall was a quiet one, like she was seeing the end she had known was coming someday.

Luca wondered what she would have done.

What if she had hidden something important from him and that came to light? Would she go on a desperate rampage? Would she make a desperate plea and try to repair the relationship? Would she give up all hope and take her own life? No, that was not it. She would not even find that negative sort of energy. She would surely stay standing, stop breathing, and simply cease to function as a living being.

"…Uuh…"

So it could not have been Karasuma Fran who stood up to those one-sided and disastrous words.

“Ah…hh.”

“That’s enough, Fran.”

It was the spiky-haired outsider who interrupted.

The girls assumed he would meaninglessly tell her she did not need to listen to any more of those painful words and she should switch it off.

But that was not what he said.

“How long are you going to sit there sobbing? If there’s something you want to say, then say it. Don’t worry about whether they’ll locate us from the signal. I’ll make up for that. More importantly, do you not care that she can just say whatever she wants about you? Of course you care, right!?”

“…?”

The withered tree in its hoodie and bikini looked unsure what he was telling her.

But the powerful light in the boy’s eyes made it clear he would keep talking until it got through to her.

“Don’t you have something to say!? If she’s saying that betraying people is always wrong and that you can’t trust someone who tries to be everyone’s friend, then you can argue back, can’t you!?”

“What…are you…?”

“Think back, Fran! Think back on everything you’ve done!!”

“But…you don’t know the truth. I kept a smile on my face all this time just so I could report back to the Anglican Church about Kamisato-chan…”

“That’s not what I meant!! That’s not what I meant at all!!!!!” cut in the boy. “I’m not talking about what it says on paper or what your official duties were. It doesn’t matter how it started! What did you think when you actually met Kamisato and how did you feel when smiling with Ellen and Salome!? Wasn’t that the true Karasuma Fran that wasn’t forced onto you by anyone else? Then! Don’t just assume that your affiliation, your actions, and your secrets are who you really are!!”

He grabbed her slender shoulders, stared into her hollow eyes, and roared at her without giving up on her strength as a human being.

“From the very beginning to the very end, you were never thinking about anything but Kamisato Kakeru, right!? After risking your life for that so many times, just what part of Karasuma Fran has wavered and just who have you betrayed!? So tell her! Tell her you wanted to bring back Kamisato Kakeru more than anyone else in the world! Tell her you were prepared to fight all of your former friends on your own to do it! You have the right to say that after walking through the winter cold, getting hit by explosions, and yet clenching your teeth to make it this far, Fran!!!!!”

That was obvious.

It was not even worth discussing.

If Fran was truly nothing more than a spy sent in from an outside group and if she simply saw Kamisato Kakeru as a threat, why had she tried to bring him back after World Rejecter erased him? Shouldn’t she have rejoiced that someone so dangerous was gone? Or if she could not ignore the right hand that could slaughter Magic Gods by the dozen even after Kamisato himself was gone, shouldn’t she have joined Kihara Yuiitsu’s group when the owner of the right hand became the ruler of the girls? But she had not done that. No matter who owned the right hand, she had continued to pursue Kamisato Kakeru. She did not know if it was even possible, but she had still bet her life on that thin, thin thread. The Anglican Church would never have ordered her to do that.

Opposing the girls of the former Kamisato Faction meant to oppose Kihara Yuiitsu. It was unclear how much the Anglican Church knew about World Rejecter, but they must have felt threatened to send Fran in. But she had expressed her desire to face that frightening power by saving Kamisato and she had proven that intent through her actions.

Didn’t that settle it?

Whatever her official position or duties were, wasn’t it obvious who Karasuma Fran’s “true affiliation” was with deep inside her heart!?

“If you’re not going to say it, I will.”

Kamijou had made up his mind.

Even if their paths would not meet and even if he would never walk by that girl’s side, he could still fight for Karasuma Fran. He had found something worth that.

“If you’re fine with that, then stay silent. If you don’t want that, then you’d better speak up. The result will be the same either way. Now, it’s time for a real fight. I

don’t care who we’re up against! You’ve decided to fight for Kamisato Kakeru and I’m with you!!”

The hoodie bikini girl did not move for a while.

No, she probably could not move.

There was no need to peek up at the face lowered toward the screen. The trembling in her shoulders faded and her groaning sobs were brought under control, so he only had to wait for her to speak for herself.

Finally, the girl raised her head.

And she spoke.

“Please don’t mock me. I am perfectly capable of deciding my own destiny.”

Her fingertips operated the screen, but Kamijou and Luca were taken aback.

She did not open a short-range line using the same radio signal Ellen had. She accessed the entire disaster information network that used the Spheres to cover a wide area.

She used the key station she had prepared for herself.

She had to know better than anyone that her accumulated influence would act as a weapon now.

“If I’m going to confess, I’m not going to half-ass it. It won’t reach him and he definitely won’t hear it, but I have to try my best to get this out to Kamisato-chan.”

Fran smiled a little.

She had recovered enough to smile with her own strength.

“So let’s make a show out of it.”

Part 12

The confession would be meaningless to the people not privy to the internal situation. But the small, small key station still sent a message out to the entire network so that it could never be taken back.

“My name is Karasuma Fran.”

Most of the people would have been confused by that.

She was not a resident of Academy City and a search through the database would not find any records on her.

“The heat wave that crippled Academy City was entirely my responsibility. I caused all of you so very, very much trouble. The hot environment weakened the Elements and restricted them enough to avoid truly catastrophic damage, but that does not excuse my actions. I must be punished.”

But.

Even though no one told them to, large crowds gathered in front of the Spheres that were opened like lotus flowers. They seemed drawn in to the planetarium-like dome and could not leave the footage played there.

“Even so, please wait just a while longer.”

It happened in the park where order was slowly returning even without a ruler.

“Please allow me just one more selfish act.”

It happened in the Show Business shelter she had once opposed.

“I am in love with someone.”

It happened in the overcrowded Hospital.

No matter how many complicated equations went into developing an advertisement, a few words from a complete amateur could fill the world instead.

Perhaps that was the power of the truth. This had a different attraction than the eerie one of Ellen’s words.

“I was told he would never return. I was told he had gone somewhere so far away that I could never reach him no matter how hard I tried. But I still want to save him. I want to do whatever it takes.”

Everyone understood.

They all thought about this girl they had never met.

“I know my feelings of love will never be fulfilled. Even if I do save him, I have carried a sin from the beginning and I can never claim that happiness for myself. But that’s fine. I just want to see his smile one more time.”

They listened.

No, perhaps it was best to say they were charmed by her.

“Once this is over, I will accept any punishment.”

So no one stopped the girl from speaking.

None of the shelter rulers interfered to the very end.

All of the Spheres agreed to act as her broadcast network. They all became regional stations for her key station.

“So please.”

And she spoke the final words.

She reached her conclusion.

“Please allow me this once-in-a-lifetime confession, *so I can bring this love to an end*.”

Part 13

Fran cut the connection to the Sphere.

Kamijou slowly exhaled and spoke.

“…You’re okay with that?”

“Yes.”

“You’re okay with that conclusion, Fran? Don’t give me that! Like hell you are!!”

“If we’re talking about what’s right or wrong and kind or cruel, then it might be easier to go along with what you’re saying.” The girl gently narrowed her eyes and did not hesitate to respond. “But this is between one boy and one girl. No one in the world can answer for me better than I can.”

“～～～～～ Dammit!!”

He could not exactly argue with that.

He had protected the world from Fiamma of the Right of God’s Right Seat when he had set the Star of Bethlehem in motion. He had spent a nearly infinite amount of time repeatedly challenging a true Magic God and ultimately returned to his original world. But Kamijou had no confidence when it came to his experience in matters of romance. This was a fight where what was right and what was kind were not enough to advance, and that was just too difficult.

“Fran.”

As a pure member of the former Kamisato Faction, Pirate Girl Luca had to have been trying to judge what distance to keep from this, but she spoke to the hoodie bikini magician.

“…If you need to cry, I’ll lend you my chest.”

“I’ll take you up on that later, believe me. But I have something else to do now.”

She stuck her index finger from her baggy sleeve and silently pointed toward heaven.

And then Karasuma Fran awoke.

“Let’s blow away all of these nuisances and leave this place.”

Part 14

In the sky, Ghost Girl Maya covered her face with her hands with her tall body wrapped in burial clothing.

She had heard most of what had happened in the network of Spheres. But due to Useful Spider’s attack, she had lost the Sphere she had directly controlled as a key

station. She had only heard reports from the girls who had been sent elsewhere to assist her.

Yes, she had only been away for a short while.

She should have been able to graphically display her influence by linking to a search service that checked for the passwords and codes mixed into the messages. But it was gone. It was all dead. No, the entirety of Academy City had been dyed in another color altogether.

All Maya had left were the Spheres directly under the former Kamisato Faction's control. Those dots were more like a stain on the otherwise pure map.

"The Spheres are so busy talking about Karasuma Fran that all the other rumors have been drowned out! 'Do what you like.', 'Well, I can't say no to a girl in love. Not to a girl in love!', and 'Let's go drinking once it's over!' That's all the shelter rulers who control the Spheres are saying!! What do we do? How do we turn this back around!?"

"No, our stuff has already grown 'outdated'. If we start forcing things back onto those old topics, they'll only grow suspicious. We can't stop the flow of information and we have to avoid standing out as much as a record scratch!!"

"What do we do? What do we do, Maya!?"

The words "shut up" nearly escaped through her clenched teeth.

It was over.

The bubble had popped.

The rumors she had nurtured and raised like the child she could never have had been destroyed so easily in the short time she had been absent.

"Fran…"

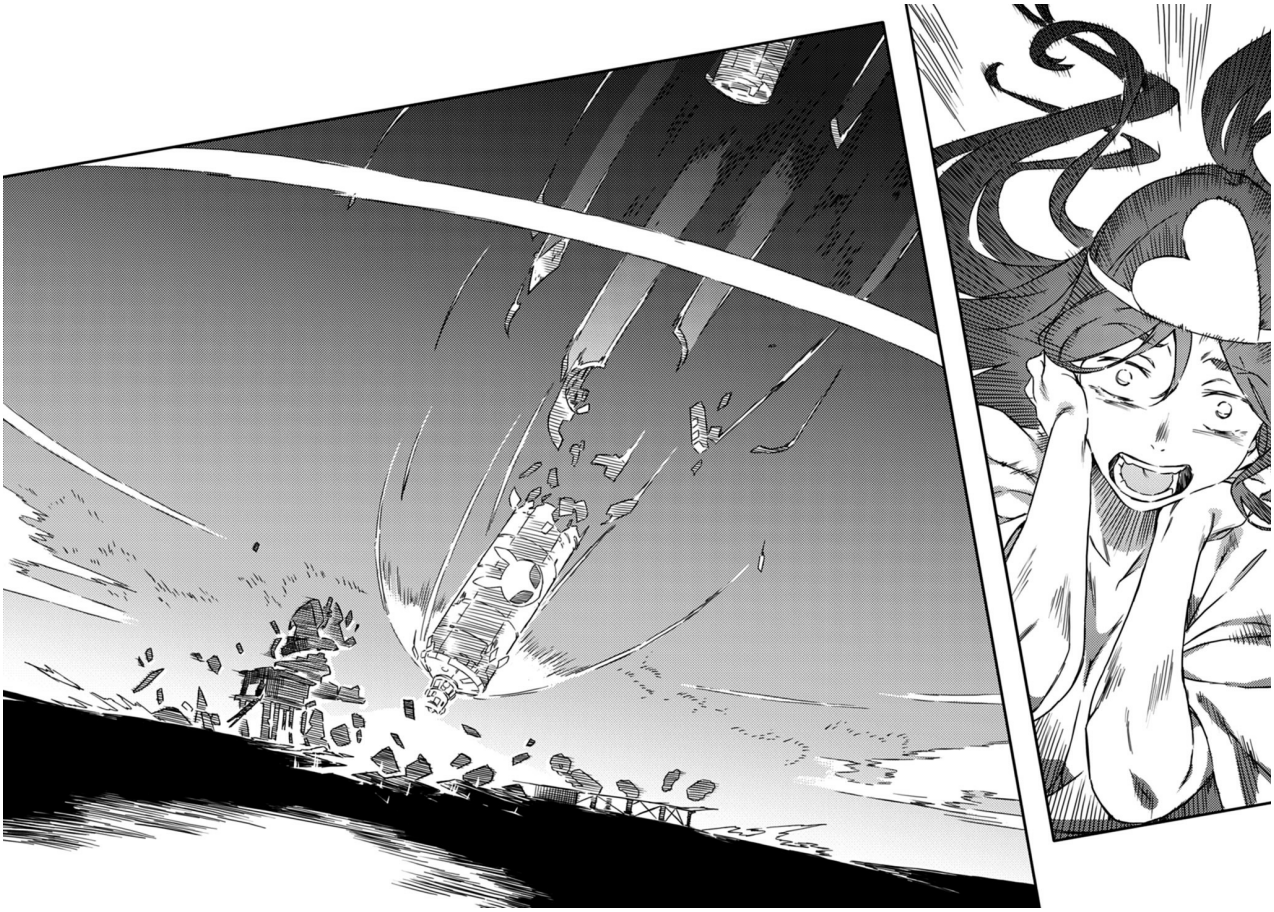
Her outline flickered unnaturally while they were supported by the will-o'-the-wisp-like Censers.

But she may have made a fundamental misunderstanding. This was a battle where the lives of the girls surrounding Kamisato Kakeru were at stake. So she had no time to lament the loss of her child. She should not have assumed that nothing Fran could do could reach her.

It started with a shining star in the heavens.

No, it was not actually a star.

It was a piece of fan art titled the Bunny Grey Messenger.



Needless to say, Karasuma Fran had created it. It was a high power microwave galactic communication station meant to speak to some unseen individual for 100 years.

Ghost Girl Maya with her long, swaying black hair had no physical body.

She only seemed to exist by using the Censers' low-frequency waves and faint aromas to destabilize the mental states of any surrounding life forms.

But what if the Censers themselves were destroyed?

"Karasuma Fraaaa

The sweet dreams were no longer necessary.

Fran had stared into the starry sky and floated through the emptiness for so long, but now she placed her feet on the ground and cast off her identity as a UFO girl.

Between the Lines 3

They spent a long time circling the earth.

Breaking free of the atmosphere using the Windowless Building had been easy enough, but matching their trajectory and speed to Magic God Tezcatlipoca for a rendezvous had been difficult. That had forced Kamisato into a trip around the planet in satellite orbit.

The earth had become a white planet where massive numbers of white bugs whirled about instead of clouds. Kamisato had initially thought it was a typhoon or something, but he had belatedly realized it was a colossal roulette wheel. This may have been Nuada's latest obsession.

Kamisato knew everything would return to normal at the end of the day, but it was still a sight void of all hope. If this was what he had seen, what would the Soviet cosmonaut have said?

"Oh, there he is, there he is☆ Tezcatlipoca is way too relaxed."

Niang-Niang licked her lips, placed her hands on her hips, and pushed out her flat chest. She did not seem to care that the weightlessness was causing the bottom of her mini-China dress to rise quite a bit.

They were truly in outer space, but none of the things in the textbooks seemed to apply. Kamisato did not need a spacesuit, the words of the god next to him reached his ears like normal, and no concern was given to the heat and radiation that was no longer being blocked by the earth's atmosphere. The Magic Gods were insane in everything they did.

"But…Tezcatlipoca? What does defeating just one of them matter when the earth is like that?"

"We just have to start by repairing the global environment. The earth has quite a few problems right now, but the biggest would be Proserpina's artificial ice age.

Spring will never come as long as she keeps at it, so we need to do something about that first."

"Like what exactly?"

"Okay, time for a hint. Tezcatlipoca is the god of a certain mythology that fought Quetzalcoatl for the throne of the gods and lost. …Although that big man you see floating over there *is the Tezcatlipoca created to combat the Spanish guy who was mistaken for the original Quetzalcoatl.*"

"Niang-Niang, you're getting off track."

"Oh, my bad. I don't know if it's due to that or just how he originally was, but he's known as a god of death that has enough power to create the world but instead uses it all to slaughter mankind. Buuuut. Being a death god isn't his only symbol. I'm pretty sure I mentioned it myself earlier, so do you remember what it is?"

"A…sun god?"

"Right. Even if the earth has been covered in darkness, we have a spare sun right here! So it's simple!! Let's send a new light down toward that planet that's closed in darkness and lost all hope!! Tezcatlipoca-chaaaaaan!!!!!!"

Kamisato heard someone gasp.

Niang-Niang showed no mercy against the muscular man floating quite nearby. The man also had a strange prosthetic leg with a large circular mirror embedded in it.

She slapped him.

She remade her arm into a giant hammer and knocked that god straight down toward the surface of the earth.

A shooting star fell.

It fell somewhere on the earth and caused an explosion far larger than the previous ones. Instead of just one point, it was more like the entire planet emitted light like a giant lightbulb. Kamisato almost thought the planet was going to set on fire and be reborn as a star.

Niang-Niang placed her hands on her hips and grinned despite the weightless bottom of her dress.

"Yeah! Now the light of hope fills the world anew!!"

“I thought I was defying some malicious schemers, but was I just lashing out at some thoughtless idiots?”

“Oh, are you finally getting over your issues?” asked Nephthys. “Give the boy a round of applause.”

“We can celebrate after getting the planet back. Begin reentry!!”

After seeing the blue planet showing itself through the fusion of extreme cold and extreme heat, Niang-Niang reignited her hand boosters. She adjusted the angle of the rocket to fly back toward the atmosphere.

“How many more times do you plan on destroying the earth?”

“As many times as it takes. Or we’ll keep doing it forever. We’ve been holding back for so long out of concern for everyone around us, you see. I doubt a century or even a millennium is going to be enough to work through all that pent up frustration. Now that something’s set us off like this, we’ve got a never-ending war of endless explosions on our hands!”

“…”

“Oh, but we don’t mind. This is an endless world of eternal war and a world where we can go all out. In a way, that’s one form of paradise. For more information, you should probably just study up on Norse Mythology, but…oh, yeah. That eyepatch-wearing thief is living as a fairy in ‘that world’, isn’t she?”

They did not have time to chat any longer.

Nephthys gently leaned up against Kamisato and her bandages came apart. No, they rewrapped themselves with Kamisato inside. They protected a god’s body from internal and external deterioration and decay.

They landed a moment later.

The hit from the largest and fastest rocket tore apart and blew away the remains of Academy City. Kamisato’s spine froze over when he realized the same thing was theoretically possible in “that world”.

“Now, now, now.”

With her feet finally back on the ground, Niang-Niang produced a creaking metal sound from her baggy sleeves.

How many Magic Gods were visible nearby?

“Chiiimeeeraaa. Now there’s an annoying one.”

“Who’s that?”

Kamisato strained his eyes to see through the smoky scenery.

Then his vision exploded with psychedelic colors.

He covered his face and screamed before the goddesses gave him a belated warning.

“Oh, a human like you should avoid looking right at her. It’s just like looking at the sun though a normal telescope and your very soul will burn away if you have poor morals.”

“Honestly. That’s supposed to be too beautiful to bear? I just don’t understand humans.”

Nephthys sounded as exasperated as a woman whose boyfriend started ogling another woman while they were on a date, but Kamisato was in no state to respond.

“Gh, bweh, boehh…”

“Are you trying to ask what that is? It’s Chimera.”

“There’s a limit to the beauty you can produce by polishing the human body, so that narcissistic and self-destructive pervert started taking in elements and structures from other creatures. Even if it’s a reaction like the renaissance was to formal religious art, it’s still frightening. Oh, and hearing her voice or smelling her scent could drive you mad, so be careful.”

Some things were unavoidable even after being warned.

Beyond his darkening vision, he heard an unstable and high-pitched sound like metal scraping together.

“*Giin giin, gwan gwan, giin, gwin gwiin, giin giin, gwin, gwan, giin!!*”

“Yes, yes. We can chat later! I know you might want to show off ever last inch of your naked body since you finally have someone to ‘appreciate’ it, but if you make Kamisato-chan go along with your perverted exhibitionism, he’ll drown in his own brain juices!!”

Kamisato could feel tears pouring down his cheeks and his head was full of

questions. Had that been a voice he had heard? Could the other Magic Gods hear it like normal? But when he tried to process it in his own mind, he was overcome by nausea like an extreme case of motion sickness. It was a dangerous sort of nausea, like he had been punched in the back of the head instead of just in the gut.

“Hey, Nephthys. The human’s vision has been cut off as you can see, so it would be nice if you could let loose and really ‘cry’.”

“I don’t think so. I’m not in the mood thanks to that pervert.”

“But your legend about crying at a god’s funeral means you can interfere with the other Magic Gods’ emotions and focus! There are tears of joy, tears of anger, tears of sorrow, and tears of awe! You can do whatever you want, so just jam them!!”

“If you want me to cry, then you had better have a good emotional story ready.”

“You always cry like a waterfall from cheap stories about things like kittens lost on a battlefield!!”

Kamisato could not see much of anything, but he started running when a slender feminine hand pulled on his. Once the psychedelic world faded and the normal world returned, he realized they were in a dark underground tunnel. Everything outside had been blown away, but the underground areas seemed to have survived.

He heard Niang-Niang’s joking voice.

“Hey, you all right? Don’t worry too much about popping a boner at that art-obsessed god’s sculpture. I’ll keep that one a secret.”

“That was such a terrible thing to say that it dragged me right back into reality. … With that and Tezcatlipoca, just how many suns do you have?”

“What are you talking about? If that obscene night flower was held up in the middle of the solar system, the world would be pitch black.”

The goddesses really did make him frown.

Seeing the beautiful bodies of those “proper goddesses” may have brought his standards of beauty back to normal. Niang-Niang and Nephthys were both Magic Gods overflowing with the scent of death, but they were far better than that Chimera. That had completely left the category of “human”.

What had it looked like to their eyes? Kamisato's entire body was pierced by the mixture of fear and curiosity brought by contact with the forbidden, but they did not have time for him to get an answer.

Something was watching them from the darkness down the half-crumbled tunnel.

"If it's not one of them, it's another."

Niang-Niang's skirt floated up as she kicked something away in annoyance.

It had likely fallen down when the surface had collapsed. Kamisato recognized the junk.

"That's that golden retriever's…A.A.A. was it called?"

"Oh? The thing that killed High Priest and Zombie?"

Nephthys sounded curious with her bandages having come loose a bit and she glanced over at the mini-China dress girl, but that pale girl shrugged and shook her head.

"You want me to copy that thing? Wouldn't work. A Magic God's death can't be accepted inside a Magic God's body."

"What even is that thing anyway?"

That secret of Academy City had completely killed two Magic Gods without World Rejecter. Since Kamijou Touma's hand had not killed or eliminated Magic God Othinus, it was a true exception on the level of Kamisato himself.

"I doubt you would understand."

"Then don't bother."

"The real issue is that the A.A.A. itself is pretty much meaningless."

He had said not to bother, but she explained anyway.

She tried to act all impressive, but she may have been prone to loneliness.

"Human, have you ever played shooting games."

"I'm more surprised that a 4000-year-old Chinese god is familiar with them."

"In those, you generally have infinite ammo and can just keep shooting forever. It

only really works in games, but how do you think you would go about forcing that onto reality?”

“…?”

“The A.A.A. is the answer. That golden retriever named Kihara Noukan was the player controlling the ship, but the bullets weren’t contained in the machine. They were transferred in from a remote location to always keep the spare ammo at max. You can think of it like that.”

“So it’s like a warp device?”

“I’m not sure I would call it that. Let’s say you use solar power or heavy hydrogen to create electricity in satellite orbit and send it down to earth in the form of microwaves or a laser. Would you call that energy transfer a warp?”

Either way, this changed who was in control. Kihara Noukan was still extraordinary for heading out to the scene, accurately avoiding the downpour of fireworks-like blasts from a bullet hell game, and fighting the boss all the while, but it was someone else who had been supplying him his firepower from behind the scenes. In a way, one could say it was that person who had killed High Priest and Zombie.

“Well, when you’ve been closed up in your shell and deceiving the world while trying to take revenge against the Magic Gods, I guess it’s a sensible evolution. Although it’s a twisted one like the small crabs that get inside of clams.”

“?”

He did not understand at all, but she seemed satisfied with the explanation.

Niang-Niang spun around to face him.

“Trying to grab something in your own hand instead of having someone give it to you is just that difficult. Especially for a normal person who’s met nothing but setbacks like him.”

“…”

“Have you recovered enough to give threatening looks? Oops.”

The lighthearted mini-China dress girl stopped speaking, but not because she had been overwhelmed by the pressure from Kamisato.

Whatever was in the darkness of the tunnel had finally attacked.

Niang-Niang pulled countless blades from her baggy sleeves and swung them randomly…or so it seemed. But a moment alter, countless sparks flew through the dimly lit space like a swarm of locusts had charged right into a bug zapper. Kamisato could not even see what it was she had intercepted.

He only heard a scraping sound.

Nephthys's chest bandages had been torn, so the brown Magic God held her arm horizontally across her chest.

"Niang-Niang."

"Sorry, sorry." She did not seem to care much. "So this time it's the Forgotten God. It's kind of sad. Lovecraft used him as reference material, but the fiction and nonfiction got mixed together so badly his original form was completely forgotten! Didn't people also decide there was a connection to Crowley, so they stopped all research into this Magic God's historicity? First that narcissistic pervert and now you. Is everyone here an exhibitionist that just wants to show off to someone!?"

"Niang-Niang, I don't think you have any right to say that after all the effort you're putting into this in front of this boy."

It was not that Kamisato could not see it due to a lack of light or due to great speed. He could not comprehend it no matter how much he stared at it. Once again, the human and the Magic Gods were likely perceiving it differently.

"Niang-Niang," warned Nephthys.

"Yeah, I know. The others are starting to gather. We're surrounded and all on our own. Plus, this is a world of never-ending battle between gods, so it's not like a human will last long anyway."

"Kh."

"We have no real way of saving you, so you'll just have to pray you're pulled out of here by someone in 'that world'."

Niang-Niang used one hand to shoot down some things flying their way and she cheerfully looked back toward Kamisato.

"By the way, human. I'd like to ask something while I still can."

"What?"

She really did make it sound casual.

And she spoke in the middle of a battle a human could not even perceive.

“In the end, how was the right hand we made?”

Not long before, he might have felt that question was worthy of death. In fact, he would not have hesitated to blow her away even if she begged for her life through trembling lips.

But he slowly sighed.

And he answered.

“Did you give no thought to how much confusion it would cause me?”

“Yeah…sorry about that. But we didn’t actually realize our desires were leaking out. We had no way of stopping it.”

“Also, it’s rare for that kind of power to dwell in a human,” explained Nephthys. “It usually ends up in an object like a demon-slaying sword or a holy mirror. Who would have thought it would choose such a short-lived creature?”

Niang-Niang gently narrowed her eyes within repeated and intense sounds of clashing metal.

Her smile was no longer a mocking sneer.

“It’s true we were selfish, but I also think this happened because it was meant to. World Rejecter is only compatible with someone that meets the conditions that match it. So there was no possibility of Kamijou Touma acquiring World Rejecter. You already knew that, right?”

“Yeah. …I’m not sure if that’s a compliment, though.”

“It is.” She answered immediately. “There must have been times when you wanted to cheer everyone on and times when you could not allow a dream to be lost as it was crushed by reality.”

“But we think the desires that leaked away from us must have sought out someone who met those conditions. Just like Kamijou Touma, there was a reason you were chosen.”

“What?”

“So it caught us completely by surprise when you suddenly attacked us. Of course, we’re celebrating that now since it brought us to this place where we won’t cause anyone any trouble. But even if that power had escaped from us, we never thought it would create enough of a grudge for someone to kill us,” said Niang-Niang. “Hey, human. There’s one phrase you really like to use: the kind of normal high school boy you can find anywhere.”

“…”

No.

It can’t be, thought Kamisato as alarm bells went off in his heart.

“But you knew better than anyone that ‘the kind of normal high school boy you can find anywhere’ is something you can’t actually find anywhere, didn’t you?”

Time came to a stop.

Or was it Kamisato’s thoughts that came to a stop?

“I mean, your life was full of jealousy of others and, in your eyes, everyone else had something you didn’t.”

Something heavy seemed to stir up the air with a low rumbling.

Niang-Niang pulled two hands’ full of weapons from her baggy sleeves. But even so, her slender body bent backwards with a deafening sound of collision. Kamisato could not see what had happened. No, he could not comprehend it. At the very least, he could tell this was different from the previous projectiles. The Forgotten God itself had likely charged in from further down the tunnel.

He finally saw something.

It looked nothing like beautiful Niang-Niang and Nephthys. But what even was it? It was extremely simplified yet incredibly eerie like a stick figure drawn by a small child awkwardly holding a black crayon.

But Niang-Niang continued in a singsong tone.

“But in that case, did other people really see you as someone who had nothing at all?”

“Niang-Niang, that’s just cruel. It’s like the smell of his own body. He probably isn’t even aware of it.”

“Even so.”

More rumbling sounds continued and something slowly rose to the surface of Kamisato’s mind.

For example, Imagine Breaker resided in another boy’s right hand, but its presence could not be proven without a supernatural power to negate. If Kamijou Touma had never moved to Academy City and lived in a perfectly normal city, he would have lived out his entire life without knowing he had that power.

“Did it never cross your mind?”

This was the same.

Kamisato Kakeru had something. Something valuable enough to attract World Rejecter. But it was highly unique and only showed itself during highly irregular situations.

“What if terrorists attacked your school? What if you ran across a cute girl being harassed by delinquents in a back alley? What would you do then? But *you’re about the only one that can pull it off after only putting that much thought into it.* Not many people can draw out accurate blueprints at that point.”

That was why the power had chosen him.

It had seen the world he lived in as the best place to allow what he had already had to shine, so it had decided World Rejecter would be most useful there.

“How did you like it?”

Niang-Niang seemed to be honestly asking.

And as she did so, she spread out countless blades like fans to block the crayon’s attack with a round shield.

“The thing about us is…well, we’re gods. We’re the ones that give, so it’s hard for us to know what it feels like for the chosen ones like you. But we were a little worried that the gift born from us was too much for you to handle.”

Kamisato fell silent for a while.

Finally, he spoke in the empty world.

“…That wasn’t what I wanted.”

"…"

"Even if I wanted something special, I only wanted something that let me brag a bit at school. I might have said it's meaningless if you don't win the gold medal, but anything would have been fine as long as it was enough of a conversation starter to fill in the silence at the karaoke box."

He could not hide anything in front of these gods.

So there was no real reason to open his mouth.

But he still said it.

He could not stop now.

"So why did it have to be a talent that only shines when you're fighting a real god? Why did it have to be something that only shows itself after things have gotten that bloody!? I mean…that's useless!! I can't share that with anyone! Who cares about winning the gold medal or being one-of-a-kind!? No matter how great an accomplishment it is, it's meaningless if you can't tell anyone about it!!"

The difference between a hero and a combat addict was paper thin.

In fact, it may have been the era that decided a combat addict was a hero that was craziest of all.

"I didn't want that!! Killing the Magic Gods didn't even feel real! So I tilted my head and kept trying until it did!! Every time Ellen, Claire, and the others praised me for it, it felt less and less like what I really wanted to do. It really hurt when my sister Salome pointed at me and accused me! I wanted to shout back and ask her why she was standing on Kamijou Touma's side!!"

He did not care how pitiful and pathetic he looked.

Sometimes facing that side of oneself held great meaning.

"That wasn't what I wanted Elza, Maya, and the rest to be smiling about. Couldn't it have just been about how good I was at making character bentos or how good I was at karaoke? When it comes to helping girls, couldn't it have just been helping them with their homework or struggling to discover their secret hobby? Why do several metal drums full of spilt blood have to come into the picture there? Someone like me can't shine in a place like that!!"

Niang-Niang deflected something to the side.

As soon as her hands were free, the little devil placed them on her hips and winked.

“If you’re bothered by that, then you’re still not a hero. That at least you don’t have to worry about.”

“It’s no different!! I can’t control myself! I’m not like Mass Murderer Salome who intentionally maintained her position as a criminal!! I never felt any guilt and I just kept swinging my arm all I wanted. It didn’t matter if there was a special power in my right hand or not. I mean, I…!!”

He clenched his teeth and confessed the one thing he should have avoided.

“I killed all of you Magic Gods without feeling even a twinge of guilt!!”

“Yeah,” said a voice.

Niang-Niang nodded in a somehow satisfied way with her hands still on her hips.

“Well, hearing that makes it sound like it was worth being killed by you.”

“…”

“From now on, your life still isn’t going to shine. In fact, if you want to shine, the world has to end up like this.”

Niang-Niang once more pulled a ton of swords and spears from her baggy sleeves. Without even looking back, she slashed behind herself countless times to intercept something that produced orange sparks.

“So what will you do? Stay in this bizarre world with the gods and continue to shine, or return to the human world and be forever buried?”

He had no words.

But he knew his own answer all too well.

So as the Magic Gods waited within the unreliable storm of slashes, the words escaped him.

“I know it’ll end up being an empty life where all I do is envy others.”

It was a hopeless complaint.

“I’m sure I’ll keep living without understanding why it is everyone around me is so

kind to me.”

It was an almost servile self-rejection.

“But…even so…”

But he made a change there.

He seemed to be defying something.

“I want to keep trying. No matter how many times it takes, I want to work toward shining in that normal world!!”

The Magic God whistled.

He only had two options, but he had grasped for a nonexistent third option.

A great roar burst out.

The mini-China dress goddess swung her arm wide to knock the crayon man away just as the ceiling crumbled and other Magic Gods looked down at them.

She had heard some hopelessly pathetic words.

But Niang-Niang and Nephthys both looked amused as they viewed the result. The mini-China dress girl slapped her own butt and the brown woman retightened the bandages wrapped around her body. And then the goddesses proclaimed.

“You really are an imperfect human. But now that we’ve taken what you really think to heart…”

“Yes. Now I can truly ‘cry’.”

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1. ↑ “Baumkuchen” is a layered cake which looks like tree rings. The name is German and it translates to “tree cake”. Wikipedia article.

Chapter 4: Or a Taboo Brings Peace – Salvage_XXX

Part 1

A high school boy like Kamijou had no way of calculating the sum total of the potential and kinetic energy dropped on the earth or how far the damage and effects to the surface would spread. So he spoke the conclusion that even a high school mind could comprehend.

“You overdid it, you idiot!! Luca said she’d lend you her chest if you wanted to cry! Just because you’re in love is no reason to use the entire earth as a punching bag!!!!!”

“U-um, I was kind of imagining a calmer sort of crying. I wasn’t planning on lending my chest to anything that aggressive…”

The pirate girl also must have been frightened by the impact of that hard punch because she was acting oddly and her voice was trembling.

Love was a frightening thing.

Kamijou spotted a torn memo pad among the scattered rubble, so he crouched down.

“What are you doing?”

“What needs to be done.”

The area overhead was cracked so wide open that it was easy to forget they were underground. He held back unathletic Fran who kept trying to move out ahead and then he and Luca finally found the door out of the rubble-filled hangar. There must have been an electric lock, but the door had bent and fallen out of place from the previous impact.

“Wow. How powerful was that impact?”

“This isn’t going to trigger a volcanic eruption, is it?”

The stairway unit was made from steel, but it had just barely retained its shape. They set foot on the stainless steel steps and began the long, long journey.

Kamijou realized Fran was no longer asking to be carried.

Something really must have changed inside her.

When they opened the door out onto the surface, everything was dark.

“That isn’t going to bring on an ice age like a meteor strike, is it? The ice age prediction was supposed to be *mis*information.”

“It’s already around 5. The sun would normally have set by now. It is midwinter after all.”

It was hard to tell whether the wreckage they saw belonged to the meteorological observatory or the space station. Kamijou almost suspected the world had ended. It was fortunate that the only people here had been the abnormal former Kamisato Faction and Useful Spider. Any normal people would have been killed instantly.

“This is no time to be glad everyone survived. That means they’re going to pursue us after this.”

As she explained that, Luca pulled one of the small motor sharing carts from the wreckage. They had come from Useful Spider, so it was not surprising some spares would be stored here.

The pirate girl was the driver again, so Kamijou and Fran clung to the roll bar from the side.

“Go, go. Let’s go,” said Fran. “Roar! Let’s wipe them all out!”

“I kind of feel bad for Kamisato since he got confessed to and rejected without getting a say in the matter…!”

The cart was situated so low to the ground that it could not drive over even a coffee can on its side, so it had trouble in the rubble. After weaving left and right to avoid the wreckage, they finally made it to the road down the mountain.

Unlike on the way up, their excess weight actually helped. They picked up more speed than expected, the small tires screeched at the sharp curves, and Kamijou felt the squeezing at his heart return.

A high-pitched sound like a distant roaring echoed through the mountains. It

came from the peak of the mountain.

“They’re beginning their pursuit. Watch out behind us!”

“I’ll take the shot when it comes to it, but you’ll load the bullet with the ramrod, right?”

“I’m not even sure what a ramrod is, but if I screw it up, it won’t blow off your fingers, will it?”

And as they discussed that, a beautiful beast slid down the slope next to them and charged right toward the cart.

Kamijou saw gorgeous long blonde ringlet curls and a dress colored a toxic blood red. She was dressed like a princess, but she ran on all fours, bared her canine teeth, growled, and went right for the throat like a beast. This girl had perfectly combined the two conflicting aspects of human and wolf.

“Mary…!?”

“Mhn!!”

Kamijou heard a strange voice while time seemed to stop.

He saw Fran pull an antenna rod from the side of her overstuffed backpack and she used that to strike the wealthy wolf on the side of the face as she tried to tear out Kamijou’s Adam’s apple. There was little force behind the blow, but the element of surprise had been effective. Mary was thrown off target, so she rolled and bounced a few times along the road before getting up like nothing had happened. She then kicked off the ground with all four limbs and pursued them with ferocious intensity.

Fran swung the antenna rod in a circle and began provoking the wolf girl for some reason.

“Curse that evolutionary Turbo Granny. I’ll aim for a homerun right off the cliff next time!”

“Fran’s been awakening in a weird direction! Aren’t people supposed to turn into a calmer adult when that happens!? Like a school doctor!!”

“School doctors are only seen as sexy because there’s a bed in the infirmary,” argued Luca. “Don’t get distracted by the decorations and lose sight of their true essence.”

“No! It’s the warmth of nursing you back to health when you’re weakened by a sudden cold that makes them so attractive to boys!! And that same aspect applies to dorm managers!!”

Meanwhile, the next one arrived.

While they were forced to drive full speed down the dangerous mountain road, a giant form *stepped over* their heads.

A far-too-giant human foot shook the earth.

Maya, the girl in white burial clothing, had grown so large they had to look up to see her properly.

Kamijou nearly forgot this was real.

It felt like having the Statue of Liberty chasing them around.

“What the hell is going on!?”

“Maya’s Censers should have been crushed when my station crashed…”

“You didn’t know?”

They could not slow down, so Luca pressed down on the gas even harder.

“In addition to her Censers, she maintains her own scent just in case. That’s why she’s always munching on vegetable sticks and sipping at sweet drinks. You’ve heard what you eat can change how you smell, right!?”

“Damn her. I always thought she was showing off her femininity by eating nothing but fruits and vegetables, but it was for this!?”

“You didn’t notice how bitter she was watching you eat as much meat and fish as you liked? And how you view a ghost without a physical body completely changes depending on where you start from. The status of a ghost in a ghost story depends on how the story got started and where it came from, right? The Censers are like an artificial ‘haunted location’. Think of it like a prism that separates light. Depending on how you mix and distribute the parts, a harmless wandering ghost can turn into a spirit that shakes an entire nation!”

“Her body is supported by a sweet smell and her body produces that sweet smell… Hm? Hmm??? What? Isn’t that like a chicken and egg situation!?” complained Kamijou.

“That’s why Maya has no weaknesses and no one can stop her once she gets her perpetual motion machine up and running with that endless cycle. She can maintain an invincible status that would warrant building a shrine and worshiping her as a god.”

“And who ever said the smell coming from Maya’s body is sweet?” asked Fran. “You make too many assumptions about girls.”

“Even if she’s an enemy, I believe in that ephemeral ghost girl’s femininity!!”

Far from ephemeral, she was stomping around like a kaiju, so it would be all over if that monster stepped on them. Even a large tour bus would be squashed so flat it would be indistinguishable from the road. As they watched, her steel pylon of a leg swung like a pendulum. As soon as Kamijou realized she was kicking like a soccer player, it happened.

A large portion of the mountain’s slope was torn away.

It went beyond who or what she was attacking.

The bedrock shattered from the frightening force of the blow and pieces of stone larger than suitcases poured down like rain. The curving mountain road was hard enough to navigate already, so the small cart swerved wildly to the left and right.

Kamijou thought he was dead. An experience one only wished to go through once in a lifetime continued on and on without end. Even with time slowing to a crawl, Kamijou realized he could not sense each and every impending death. He grew accustomed to the feeling and they all shot right past him. His heart could not keep up with this deadly ride that came rushing at him at such high speed.

“Curse Maya. She’s not paying much attention to her feet after growing so big.”

“Yeah, she has pretty large breasts, so when she stops hunching forward and stands up straight, she can’t see her feet and ends up tripping.”

“Bff!! Cough, cough!!”

Kamijou briefly heard some unfortunate chatter, but he refocused on the battle soon thereafter.

“B-but Maya’s firepower is top class, so she’ll get someone else to target for her so she doesn’t waste her attacks.”

“My money is on that tracer Ellen. The two of them together would be like a ballistic missile and radar.”

The trip down the mountain path was much faster.

In no time, they left the mountain and entered the streets of Academy City on the cart.

Part 2

“Yes.”

Below the Windowless Building, Kihara Yuiitsu stretched and spoke.

“While pretending to fear me and making me the villain, are they starting to grow accustomed to the cruel stimuli?”

Part 3

Kamijou’s group wished to retrieve the original A.A.A. from the District 11 container yard and use it to create the magical tunnel needed to rescue Kamisato. With their base in that state, Useful Spider would be unable to continue guarding the containers.

Kamijou and the girls raced through the powerless streets with no traffic lights.

There seemed to be quite a few people driving in makeshift races that had no bearing on the recovery, but this was entirely different. A girl in a red dress moving on all fours was easily keeping up with a four-wheel cart powered by a 50cc engine, a magical girl was flying overhead with a jet engine on her wand, a girl in a suit of armor and covered in weapons was riding a military horse, a young wife in a swimsuit and apron was sliding along the road in ice boots, 10 yen coins filled the sky like a flock of wild birds and poured down one after another, and a vengeful spirit the size of a high-rise building was pursuing them from behind. Anyone who did not get out of their way now had to be suicidal. Someone like that would clearly lack the fundamental human ability to learn.

“This looks like the Hyakki Yakou! We’re going to start a new legend!!”

The most dangerous one may have been Ellen the Tracer. She had no direct combat skill, so she had hitched a ride with the girl who was controlling a mechanical lizard the size of a semi-trailer truck. It was unclear how accurate she was during this car chase, but they could not assume they would lose their pursuit just by turning a corner. These girls would continue chasing them forever. And Ellen also increased the accuracy of the powerful but hard-to-aim people like Maya, so she was too large a risk to ignore.

“Luca, do you have a countermeasure!?”

“I’m already doing it!”

“Fran, I want your opinion as a magician this time. The keys are the original A.A.A. and a Caribbean magician. Do you think we can save Kamisato with Luca’s help?”

“Don’t underestimate a girl experiencing the high of announcing her broken heart.”

“I see,” said Kamijou with a smile.

He too made up his mind.

“Then leave the rest to me.”

It was a mystery where the functioning vehicle had come from, but a giant yellow school bus charged into the intersection from the side.

“Deborah… That trucker girl!!”

The pirate girl’s eyes widened. The cart took a sharp turn and slipped right under

the bumper of the approaching bus.

Or it should have.

But while clinging to the same roll bar, Fran saw Kamijou Touma let go and use the momentum of the turn to leap toward the school bus.

If he had jumped toward the hard windshield, he would have been killed instantly.

The side windows were intentionally made more fragile so they could be broken to escape if the bus sank, but Kamijou's forehead was still split open when he broke through one of them head first. But he gained something worth the price. With a loud shattering sound, he and a sea of glass rolled inside the deadly weapon on wheels. With blood flowing down his face, he grabbed at the driver.

"Wah! Dammit, you…!!"

"Sorry. I regret only running from the High Priest. And because I stayed silent and watched with Kamisato, I can't escape the weight bearing down on my back. I'm sick of that sort of thing!!"

It was unclear how strong Deborah was, but she could not do much while focused on driving the bus. When he grabbed at her, the large wheel spun wildly and the mass of steel lost its balance. It swerved nearly perpendicular to the road, rolled onto its side, and slid along while making a mess of everything on the inside and outside.

The armor girl's horse was nearly hit by the sliding bus, so she frantically pulled on the reins, lost control, and fell from her steed. Wolf Girl Mary tried to slip past the bus on the side just as the back of the bus ran into a pile of white sand. The bus hopped up irregularly and betrayed Mary's expectations. The heavy mass hit her like a roundhouse kick and the quadruped in red dress and blonde ringlet curls was thrown through a nearby building's window.

The driver named Deborah had long since passed out.

Kamijou grabbed the fire extinguisher kept inside the bus, smashed the window that was pointing up now that the bus was on its side, and climbed up on top. He brushed up his bangs that were wet with his own blood. The giant mechanical lizard jumped over the bus like it was a hurdle and the broom-riding cosplayer passed by overhead. A weird bicycle where the rider lay on their back – he thought it was called a recumbent bicycle – approached next. He threw the fire extinguisher at the rider, scored a direct hit, borrowed the bicycle from the girl

who slammed into a pile of white sand, and righted the bicycle in both hands. He could never get used to how the pedals were located out front where the handlebars would normally be. He made a few imitative attempts and managed to start riding it while lying on his back and looking down toward his feet.

“What is with this bike? This is going to hurt my neck…!”

He had trouble getting going, but it was stable enough once he was up to speed. And this seemed to be a racing model, so as he changed the gears, he felt like the sharp wind was blowing by even faster than in the cart. Elza growled like a beast and her fingers passed right by him, but his throat just barely escaped. He drove on out ahead.

He raced toward the giant lizard that Ellen was riding.

That was when the night air whirled unnaturally overhead.

“Ma…ya…!?”

After seeing Fran’s station fall, it may have been wrong to compare something to a meteor so readily, but the foot dropping vertically toward him really was like a meteor. The one strike took out entire piles of white sand, smashed the asphalt, and caused the buildings to creak, suggesting either their earthquake-absorbing structures or their actual foundation had been taken out.

“Stay away…”

The ground itself, and not just the recumbent bicycle, hopped up.

Keeping himself from falling off the special bicycle was the most he could manage.

“Stay away from our Kamisato-kun!!!!!!”

But the roaring vengeful spirit still had poor aim. If Luca was to be believed, Maya had not crushed Kamijou underfoot because her breasts were too big to see anything down there, but he could not rely on that coincidence again and again.

(Is Luca having trouble too?)

They could not communicate by cellphone and he did not have a navigation system displaying her position, but if he followed the former Kamisato Faction, he could gain a general idea of where Luca and Fran’s cart was fleeing. They had clearly strayed from the shortest route to District 11. They seemed to be fleeing in circles.

Whatever the horsepower of the moped-sized 50cc engine, it had to have great fuel efficiency. They would not run out of gas so easily, but the driver's willpower was a different matter. They needed to lose their pursuit sooner rather than later. The tracer was preventing that, so Kamijou had to eliminate Ellen.

And with his own wheels, catching up to her was not that difficult. After all, Ellen herself was busy tracking the cart out ahead. Since she could not choose her own course, it was obvious who had the advantage.

Kamijou pedaled the racing recumbent bicycle at tremendous speed and kept the mechanical lizard in his sights. Then he thought he heard the girl in the baggy lab coat click her tongue.

"Tch!! Maya, add a +3 correction. I'll tell you their estimated loca-…"

She trailed off and pushed the radio away from her ear while flinching from a loud noise.

"Oh, curse you, Fran!! She's jamming us from her backpack!!"

Kamijou was not the only one fighting.

While the large lizard slowed down, Kamijou pedaled the racing bicycle and caught up. He rode up alongside it.

"Lime!!"

With that shout, the large lizard swung its tail.

Kamijou's recumbent bicycle was thrown through the air. With a normal bicycle, his legs would have been smashed along with the frame, but the strange design paid off here. Since he was lying on his back, the bicycle below him was destroyed, but it did not reach Kamijou himself.

In fact, he remained right there in the air like with a Daruma Otoshi doll and he fell on top of the lizard's thick tail.

He was fully focused on his task.

He clung onto the tail as it desperately tried to shake him off, but then it reacted to Imagine Breaker. With no brakes, the running lizard fell apart and scattered across the road, momentum intact.

Kamijou slammed into a pile of white sand.

“God…dammit…”

(I can’t let it end here. None of it is over yet. I haven’t saved anyone…)

He felt woozy after the blow to his entire body, but he forcibly gathered his thoughts and got back up.

He saw a small form similarly standing in the darkness.

“…Ellen.”

“Why is it you…?”

Unlike Kamijou, she had slid across the asphalt and had to have taken a lot of damage. Even so, she got up. There was great resentment in her voice and a light burned in her eyes. She supposedly had no direct ability to fight, but she stood back up on pure willpower.

“You aren’t Fran and you aren’t Luca. Why does it have to be you, the one who doesn’t understand anything…?”

“How should I know?” spat out the spiky-haired boy. “But if I had to say, maybe it’s because their true battlefield lies elsewhere. I promised them they could leave the rest to me, so I’ll take care of this entire pain-in-the-ass warmup round. That way Fran and Luca can focus on Kamisato.”

“Fran was lying to us…”

“So what?”

“If she hadn’t guided Kamisato-han here, none of that would have happened!! He matters more than my life, so I can’t leave his fate in her hands!!”

“Isn’t that all the more reason to give her a chance to make up for what she did? She wanted to be one of you, but she couldn’t. Yet she still found herself smiling happily with the rest of you, so can’t she do something here!? Kamisato asked me to take care of you girls. And Fran asked me to help bring her love to an end. None of you could be more stupid, so I’ve got to stick with you all to the end. I’ve steeled myself for this already!! I have no intention of digging back up the old arguments about right and wrong at this point!! If that was going to shake my resolve, I never would have urged Fran to action and picked a fight with you all!!!!!!”

Then a smile formed on Ellen’s lips.

It was the ferocious smile of someone viewing their enemy, but the girl still smiled.

“…You really are different.”

She sounded like she was confirming something more important than the truth of the world.

“You seem somewhat like Kamisato-han, but you’re completely different inside.”

“To hell with that. Don’t even compare me to that bastard.”

She was not a fighter.

She was meant to use her delicate forensics skills to provide logistical support.

“I am Arimura Ellen.”

But the girl in the baggy lab coat did not take a single step back.

Just like Karasuma Fran and Toyama Luca, Arimura Ellen had feelings she could not shake free of.

“I will not hold back!!!!!!”

It only took one attack.

And that was why Kamijou Touma did not even think about holding back either.

Part 4

Kamijou looked down at the unconscious girl for a while.

That was when a familiar cart dove out from the intersection’s side road. He had thought they were far out ahead, but they must have returned to the same place while trying to escape.

“Perfect timing. Hop on!!”

“Thanks.”

Kamijou grabbed onto the roll bar again while glancing back toward the baggy lab coat girl lying unmoving on the ground.

Hoodie Bikini and Rabbit-Ear Antennae Fran gave a warning with no readable emotion on her face.

“That was too reckless.”

“Not as reckless as you.”

He smiled bitterly while accepting the Bunny Grey band aid the expressionless girl gave him.

The cart took off once more. They had eliminated Ellen the Tracer, but that did not mean the threat was entirely gone. No matter how poor their aim was, plenty of their enemies had enough firepower to destroy them in a single attack if they did hit.

“So what do we do!? Since you managed to pick me up after I jumped off, you must be driving in circles. Can we really escape Maya, Elza, and the rest of that crazy Hyakki Yakou!?”

“Not to worry. It took a while, but we’re about to leave District 7 and enter District 18. It won’t take long to get to District 11 now!!”

“I wasn’t talking about-…”

Kamijou stopped midsentence and looked back while clinging to the roll bar.

“Fffffraaaan…”

The ghost girl in white burial clothing and vaguely heart-shaped headdress was pursuing them with her giant legs. She slipped between buildings and the entire street shook like an unreliable thicket of trees in a typhoon.

“Don’t threaten Kamisato-kuuun!! Karasuma Fraaan!!!!!!”

“How can you pull off the magical ceremony needed to save Kamisato with that chasing us!? I don’t know how hard those ceremonies are, but we’re done for if one of her soccer kicks or head slides hits us!!”

“With that cosplay girl Olivia and the others up in the air, we can never escape on the ground. It’s like having a helicopter in the air during a car chase.”

As Luca drove the cart, a clear change came over the scenery.

While they had been surrounded by college prep schools with strange shapes thanks to the famous designers that worked on them, they now saw pyramids of stacked metal containers and gantry cranes that almost looked like giant torii.

It was hard to read without any streetlights, but the sign that flew by clearly said District 11.

“We made it…”

Maya and more of the former Kamisato Faction were still in hot pursuit. At this rate, they would be guiding those girls to the site of the ceremony. It was as hopeless as attempting a risky surgical procedure while a biker gang poured into the hospital.

But even though Luca held the wheel and would be the one holding the scalpel, her face contained some tension, but no irritation.

“Why do you think we were circling around and around that dangerous city?”

“?”

Hadn’t that been to get as far away as they could from the former Kamisato Faction? And hadn’t they failed to lose those girls?

But Kamijou’s guess was wrong.

“I knew from the beginning this 50cc cart couldn’t truly lose them. In fact, not even a floating supercar loaded with an antigravity engine could manage that,” said Luca. “And if they can interfere with the ceremonial ground in the container yard, all of this will be for naught. So setting up the defensive line here would be a losing gamble from the outset. Failure would be our only option.”

But the pirate girl was not done speaking.

She had more to say.

“So did you really think I would set up a defensive line with a countdown to the end of the crucial ceremony? I’d never allow that! The only way to ensure they won’t interfere even for an instant is to set everything up so I can complete the entire ceremony as soon I arrive on the scene. That’s what I was doing while driving around the city!!”

Part 5

How had Ellen, the tracer and forensics girl, been following Luca and Fran's cart around?

More than just perfect pitch, all of that girl's senses were perfect sensory analysis devices, so what exactly had she picked up on in this wide world?

"Hm, hm, hm. I see. She must be in a rush because she's spilling quite a bit there."

Baggy Lab Coat Ellen had smiled while riding the giant mechanical lizard controlled by Lime, who wore traditional Japanese clothing yet had coral-like angel wings growing from her back with strings extending from each point.

"What can you see? Their exhaust or the tire marks?"

"There is that, but the biggest one is the gunpowder. She must have needed a nitrogen compound like nitric acid, but that's my specialty since it's an established part of quite a few inspection methods. I would never mistake this smell."

Ellen had laughed and hid her mouth behind one baggy sleeve.

"Also, Luca uses an outdated musket, so it uses antique black powder. She's so intent on using the old-fashioned production methods that it has a distinct aroma. Academy City is a dangerous city, but the scent of that retro gunpowder stands out in this high-tech city. There is simply no way she can escape me now."

But Ellen should have wondered if that scent of gunpowder really was being leaked on accident. She should have asked if Luca might be letting it spill behind the cart as she drove out ahead.

As she shook the dark city around her, Ghost Girl Maya knew victory was hers. The enemy was only fleeing and had not put any more distance between them. She did not know where they were going or what they would do there, but they would be unable to calmly enter their base and relax if this continued. She did not need to give this too much thought. She only had to continue chasing them to either crush them or wait for them to make a mistake and crash.

She could not be shaken.

The ghost girl in burial clothes could not be shaken when she was working to protect Kamisato Kakeru.

After all, he had accepted her.

A mysterious shadow had appeared on the way back from school at night. Everyone had known what it was. And in front of that girl who could not remember how she had died or even what her name was, they had asked if she wanted her body back, wondered if she wanted to rest in peace, speculated she had been on the volleyball team because she was so tall, suggested they check through the records, and said plenty of other things, but he had been the only one.

Only he had said she was fine the way she was.

Only he had said a ghost was fine as a ghost.

So.

So Goryou Maya would no longer run from what she wanted to do.

To that end. The ethereal girl manipulated the “incense” coming from her chest and the nape of her neck to alter how she looked and was interpreted. If she could see that boy again and if she could see his smile again, she would become a vengeful spirit, an evil spirit, or whatever else it took to accomplish “what she most wanted to do”.

But then she heard a high-pitched voice. Cosplay Girl Olivia, who had her shortish brown hair in twintails and rode a magic wand equipped with a jet engine, used the voice of the original Magical Powered Kanamin that it was rumored not even the original voice actress could reproduce any longer.

“Wait, Maya. Something isn’t right!”

“What exactly isn’t right!?”

“This path…this way of fleeing… It has to be on purpose. I vaguely recognize some of it from when I was checking through books on ancient runes to fill in some gaps not on the released design sheets. This is based on a modified hexagram drawn with a single brushstroke and it’s used to draw out the power of the sun to-…!?”

She did not manage to finish.

And we return to the present.

After arriving in the container yard, Luca kept one hand on the wheel and spun her large musket around in her other hand. When the bullet and powder were directly pushed down through the muzzle, it was not a good idea to aim straight down, but that did not matter here.

Any hint of a muzzle flash was enough.

The orange sparks only needed to ignite the line of gunpowder drawn out on the ground.

The feathered pirate hat and eyepatch girl sang.

“Let’s kick off the show.”

The surge of flames raced around the city at 6000 meters per second.

Ghost Girl Maya had grown as tall as a high-rise building, but even she would have had difficulty seeing the whole.

The ones who were truly left speechless were those like Cosplay Girl Olivia who flew freely through the sky.

In the dark and powerless city, orange lines were drawn out like a part of a fireworks show. And they drew out a secret and mystical symbol that had no place in a city of cutting-edge science.

“This is bad, Maya!! They’re already reaching toward Kamisato-kun’s fate!! This will never work without World Rejecter as the gate. They’re just letting their emotions get the better of them and they might as well be attempting heart surgery on him with a rusty scalpel! We can’t let them do this!!!!!!”

“!?”

But their impatience did not matter.

The cart driving out ahead contained Luca, a complex tangle of Voodoo and piracy, as well as Fran, who had shed her shell as a UFO girl and returned as an unlucky star expert. They had both entered a unique mental state using a special focusing method much like those used by stage actors to get into character.

Their lips were moving. They sent a vibration into the modified hexagram they had carved into the planet.

“The peace of the six points is obtained through the four stages created by combining the great triangle of fire with the great triangle of water. But to achieve the result first and foremost, we seek the secrets of the simplified six points drawn from straight lines. We desire to summon the sun, but cast aside Apollo and retrieve Horus. Know that the world’s true image is found in the lost Library of Alexandria!!”

Something changed.

The foundation of the gray steel and concrete city was pulled out.

“Know that Horus is not a mere descendent of dead gods, but the foundation of the forces which shall cleanse the world of the accumulated stains of the cross. Correspondence, correspondence, correspondence. Shake the star which holds the opposing peaks of Da’at and Yesod.”

It was like the air had solidified with human killer intent. The extreme mental state much like “getting into character” ruled the dark container yard.

It was all remade into a tranquil sacred ground.

“Distort.”

One of the two voices sometimes passed the other, sometimes was passed by the other, and sometimes coincided perfectly with the other.

It was like two different equilateral triangles lining up and moving apart to create a different shape and provide different meaning from moment to moment. The combination of the limited resources called in endless possibility.

“The separate image of the Four Worlds from which power is drawn becomes a different Four Worlds like the moon’s reflection in a lake.”

Kamijou began to wonder if he should be here.

He had not washed his body, his face, or even his hands. He wondered if he should be standing in this sacrosanct place while so filthy.

“The sun of Horus which shall cleanse the world shall be known by the divine name of Kamisato Kakeru!!”

All the while, wedges were driven into the world.

A supposedly lost name was once more carved powerfully into it.

“Legba Atibon is a frightening being who can surpass even time as the gate to manage all ceremonies. But just as the Qliphoth becomes a powerful compass that points to the truth of the world when used with truly accurate discernment, the curse of the second Aeon can be used as a powerful prism to divide the forces. This shall distort the line to the planet which descends toward the six-pointed star and thus shall substitute the symbols.”

There was no obvious light or sound.

But that was only because Kamijou could not see it. Just like the boy on the ground could not perceive the magic circle drawn across the city with gunpowder.

“Bind and strengthen the planetary symbol with the star of power carved into the earth.”

Something was changing.

No, it was being intentionally changed by human hands.

Even so, the girls’ power must not have been enough because they revealed the existence of a powerful trick up their sleeve.

“The symbol’s name is A.A.A.”

Finally, even an amateur like Kamijou could detect the change.

One of the metal containers forming a great pyramid began to glow despite its component materials and how thick it was. It was like the north star that guided sailors.

“Just like the endless reflection of opposing mirrors, they overlap like the rings of a powerful tree and provide the power to gaze into the abyss. As the identical symbols approach, have them resonate, just as the slightest breeze can occasionally break a stone bridge and send it plunging into the sea.”

What did it look like from above?

It may have been like being trapped in a harmful hallucination after reaching the end of an endless task, such as peering to the very back of the image in opposing mirrors or continually opening a Russian nesting doll until an electron microscope was needed

Or perhaps it was like peering into the depths beyond the deepest depths.

And after they broke through that thick wall, would they find that other boy they

needed to drag back up?

“Edward Alexander, aka Crowley, says a great demon never before seen and not mentioned in any holy text can be summoned through a combination of the existing methods. So he said to learn that method and to break through the common view of the world with something that can be found anywhere!!”

A name was spoken.

It was the name of someone who had shaken the world to the point that it was thought he would destroy it.

“Tonight, we shall destroy one of the impossibilities facing the world! Summon the divine name of Kamisato Kakeru with physical form and fix him to Olam Asiyah, the surface of the Four Worlds!!!!!!”

In that instant, everyone there had to have been thinking the same thing. That of course applied to Kamijou, Fran, and Luca, but it was also true of Maya, Olivia, and the other girls pursuing them.

They wanted Kamisato Kakeru to return.

But because that missing boy was so important to them, the girls had taken different paths.

As Ghost Girl Maya, Cosplay Girl Olivia, and the others watched the ceremony begin without them, they all thought the same thing.

They wanted Kamisato Kakeru to return.

But they could not entrust his life to an untrustworthy doctor.

Because they had just the one chance, they could not let this group waste it.

The command was given by Olivia, the girl with shortish twintails who could see the entirety of the scene from her jet engine magic wand.

“Mayaaa

If they tried this without Kihara Yuiitsu's World Rejecter, it would all fail and the perilous suspension bridge would definitely fall. So to stay just a hair's breadth away from that "definitely", the girls could not allow anyone else to act on any other hopes.

They did not have time to analyze the entire scene from the foundation to the corresponding tools, so they did not know what method this magical ceremony was using. So Maya used her high-rise building height to attack the most obvious thing.

One thing stood out here.

Among the countless metal boxes in the container yard, a single light glowed like the north star above the dark sea.

It was the A.A.A.

The Anti-Art Attachment.

There was a roar.

The swinging fist could not attack just the one container, so it blew away the entire pyramid of metal boxes.

Part 6

"Kh…"

Kamijou Touma could only watch as it happened before his eyes.

The A.A.A. was the other mirror that corresponded to the magical circle carved into the city. That symbol created an endless array of images to create a normally impossible resonance, but it was shattered by an attack that tore into the very landscape.

"What happened to the ceremony? What about Kamisa-…!!"

He did not have time to finish his question.

The pyramid did not vanish after it was knocked into the air. The airborne objects

were pulled back down by gravity. And they were not at all concerned about the tiny cart as it drove along.

As they fell all over the place, bounced around unnaturally, and sometimes broke apart or burst, Pirate Girl Luca desperately operated the steering wheel, but she could not handle it all. The cart could not support all three people's weight as it swerved in a sharp S-shape, so it rose from the ground. The situation took a decisive turn when Fran let go of the roll bar lest she be trapped between the cart and the ground.

The cart rolled sideways.

Kamijou's vision was utter chaos.

He had no idea where he was rolling to. After the countless containers had fallen randomly around, the yard was like a giant labyrinth. The surface of his body felt hot. He felt ill like his body's core had been shifted sideways by an invisible hand. He flipped from his back onto his stomach and took several deep breaths. If he had stayed on his back, he had seriously feared he would vomit and be unable to avoid drowning to death in it.

(Why am I feeling nauseous…after a blow to my body? Dammit, what is happening to my body?)

He shook his woozy head and somehow managed to grab onto a nearby container wall. He slowly stood up.

What had happened to Fran? Was Luca all right?

And what had happened to their magic ceremony?

"Yeah…"

Kamijou Touma had no specialized magical knowledge. Index and Leivinia Birdway had explained it to him, but that had not reached the level of techniques he could actually use. However, there was one thing even his spiky-haired head could intuitively understand.

After all, Kamisato Kakeru was nowhere to be seen.

So there was no way it had succeeded.

He was surrounded by silence.

No one was moving.

As he stood there, Kamijou finally spotted Fran's small form in the disastrous scene. She was resting her back against a collapsed container. The overstuffed backpack may have saved that rabbit-ear antennae girl.

"Fran! Hey, Fran!!"

Kamijou Touma walked unsteadily through the labyrinth to approach her.

She did not respond.

She was simply staring up into the night sky.

Was she searching for something there or trying to suppress the rising tears?

He also spotted Pirate Girl Luca.

She was collapsed near the toppled cart, so he passed his arms below hers and dragged her away in case the engine caught fire.

She was limp.

She seemed to be conscious, but she felt as heavy and hopeless as a corpse in his arms.

(Why?)

Kamijou bit his lip.

(Why did this happen!!!???)

It had looked like something would happen. Even an amateur like him had felt the signs of success. They had to have been so close. If they had given it just a small push more, it would have been like pouring one last drop into the cup so the surface tension broke and water spilled out. They might have broken down the wall between worlds.

No one here hated Kamisato Kakeru. They were all fighting based on their feelings for him. And yet this was how it had turned out. It had all stayed on the preset rails, they had failed to save Kamisato, and the girls were still trapped by the right hand and only able to obey Kihara Yuiitsu's every word.

There was no light anywhere.

Kamijou could no longer tell where the A.A.A.'s container was. And the fact that the glowing container had fallen silent seemed to imply that something had

ended. After all, they had nothing else to use. Rescuing someone who had been sent to an isolated frame by World Rejecter had always been like grasping a cloud. They had only found a point in common because Kamisato had just so happened to fight the original A.A.A. beforehand and had sent that device to the "other world". That was not the kind of coincidence they could hope to find again. With that single opportunity stolen from them, no amount of struggling would-…

"…No?"

Something caught in a corner of Kamijou's mind.

There was something he could not afford to overlook. Kamijou and Kamisato had not known each other for very long, but that short time had been packed full of events. He thought back over all of those.

Was the original A.A.A. really the only starting point for rescuing Kamisato?

Was there really nothing else?

He needed to recall everything he had been involved in.

Was there an item in common between the two worlds?

Was there something deeply linked to the world of magic?

"Wait."

He had assumed it had been erased. He had assumed he would never see it again and had driven it from his mind.

But if he was going to seek Kamisato Kakeru who had also been erased…

If he was allowing himself to think about the people who had supposedly vanished…

"There is something."

"?"

Fran had looked like an empty-eyed doll, but her head finally moved. There was still no light of willpower there, but the spiky-haired boy understood his next words would greatly influence the fate of everything here.

"It isn't just the original A.A.A.! There's something else with extremely powerful magical symbolism that exists in both 'this world' and 'that world'!! We still have

hope!!”

So he said it.

He gave his conclusion.

“It’s Nephthys!! 90% of her was erased in advance and the remaining 10% was remade into Patricia Birdway’s body. That Magic God exists in both worlds!!”

Part 7

A brown goddess with long silver hair rubbed a scar on her cheek.

“Oh dear. It must be difficult to send us here without leaving a mark.”

Part 8

On occasion, a short statement could dramatically change the world.

“!!!!!!”

“!!!!!!”

As soon as they received new hope from Kamijou, Fran and Luca shot to their feet. They actually grabbed his arms and dragged him inside one of the containers that had burst open from the fall.

“That leaves Kamijou Touma…”

The ground trembled as the ghost girl’s giant foot dropped down surprisingly close nearby. It did not seem to be a specific attack because the “footsteps” continued on with the same rhythm.

“If we bring his head back, we can preserve the current status quo. We can protect Kamisato-kun…!”

That girl had no guarantee either. Even if the plan had failed this time, she could not allow Fran and Luca to escape if she decided those two could do the same thing again. And Kihara Yuiitsu had specifically ordered the death of Kamijou. He doubted she would leave before taking his head.

“First of all, explain this. Is the Patricia you mentioned *that* Patricia?”

“Yes! I mean the blonde girl who met Kamisato during the whole Sample Shoggoth business. You were there for the attack on my dorm, so don’t you remember what happened at the end there? The brown Magic God sacrificed herself to save Patricia, right!?”

“Come to think of it, I think I saw her watching us from the hospital window.”

“You’re right about that too. Our goal is the hospital Misaka led us to. It’s in District 7, so that’s pretty far away. But can we still do it!?”

There was no way they would argue with him.

They would grab at even the slightest hope now.

“The A.A.A. and Nephthys will have quite different symbols.”

“And this sounds like it will involve infection magic in addition to imitative. But Crowley is a magician deeply rooted in Egypt. If we can somehow link this to the secrets of Isis, Osiris, and Horus, we can use that as a starting point…”

“Hey.”

An amateur like Kamijou could not judge the value of the information, so he threw out everything he had learned speaking with that true Magic God.

“Nephthys said something about having a habit of crying. Othinus said something about her not using a set system and instead helping out whatever human is around when she feels like it, but is that related to her traits as a god?”

“The crying woman at Osiris’s funeral…!! Luca, what about that!?”

“It’s a bit of a detour, but we’ve got our connection. Crowley viewed Osiris less as a god than as a symbol of death and we’re dragging Kamisato-kun up from the bog of death. Nephthys is related to funerals, so we can try to use that to achieve a resonance with the hexagram drawn out across the city!!”

That just left one question: how to return to the District 7 hospital. The cart had rolled over when the container yard had been blown away, so it was useless now.

“Luca, is there some kind of vehicle in the container yard you can drive? It’s a distribution base, so they should have plenty of trucks, mobile cranes, and forklifts.”

“I’m only licensed up to mid-sized motorcycles. Only that trucker Deborah would be able to drive those giant things with weird centers of gravity and wheel positions. If I try to drive one of those like the cart, it’ll topple over at the first curve.”

“And don’t forget about my heat wave microwaves. Even if a truck was abandoned here, it wouldn’t run anymore. All the electronics would have been wiped out.”

“Then what do we do!? Even if Ellen is out of the picture, Olivia and the others are still overhead. We can’t lose them on foot or on bicycles!!”

Then again, that would be true even if they could still use the cart.

Without enough speed to lose Olivia, the former Kamisato Faction would be hot on their heels all the way to the District 7 hospital. And instead of the original A.A.A. which was essentially a pile of junk, the attack would hit the hospital and Patricia this time.

What could they do?

And as they all tried to think of something, they heard rotors loudly chopping at the air.

They were large transport helicopters. Not many people still had functioning engines at their disposal in the dead city and one option came to mind immediately thanks to all the chaos they had experienced on the way here.

“Useful Spider!?” shouted Fran. “If they survived, they should’ve just stayed put!!”

“Well, it was your station that supplied the finishing blow to their observatory.”

With their base destroyed, they must not have been able to acquire more equipment. They were no longer fighting on equal footing with the former Kamisato Faction. They were trying to land here and there on the container yard, but most of them were shot down by Magical Girl Olivia and the others flying around.

And it seemed Useful Spider was after more than just a chaotic brawl.

Someone spoke from the loudspeaker on one of the helicopters that lowered its altitude while spewing black smoke.

“If you’re stuck, we can lend a hand!! If you need transportation, hop onto any one of the choppers!!”

That helicopter could not maintain its position and made an emergency landing behind a pyramid.

Kamijou and the girls exchanged a glance.

“Is it a bluff meant to lure us out?”

“They’re losing far too many helicopters for that, don’t you think?”

Kamijou stuck his head out of the container’s broken door and looked up at the helicopters shining spotlights down.

And he spoke.

“Let’s do it.”

“What if it’s a trap?”

Kamijou did not answer. When the spiky-haired boy took the first step outside, Hoodie Bikini Fran and Pirate Hat Luca followed.

With Maya swinging her arms around while standing as tall as a high-rise building and with Olivia using her jet engine for aerial combat, the container yard had become hell on earth. Useful Spider was sporadically fighting back with the heavy machineguns sticking out from the side cargo doors, but it felt more like a way to distract their opponents than to defeat them. Useful Spider was buying time while knowing they would be defeated. They wanted to get as many helicopters to the ground as possible so they could wait for someone.

A bright spotlight briefly shined down on Kamijou and the girls, but instead of stopping like in the theatre, it quickly moved away. Useful Spider may have decided drawing attention to them would only show the enemy where they were.

If Useful Spider intended to shoot them, they would have kept the light on them and started firing the heavy machineguns, but they did not.

“Hm? What’s going on?”

Luca frowned as they approached a helicopter that had finally managed to land.

The man operating the heavy machinegun was beckoning them into the cargo door.

“Hurry up!! Hurry!!”

Still confused, the three of them piled on as the rotor above grew louder. The floor rocked due to the unstable motion, but the helicopter managed to rise.

Kamijou asked a question while still collapsed on the floor.

“Did you read the message I left?”

“Yeah, you mean the memo saying to help out if we really wanted to resolve all this, right? We thought it was just some kid’s nonsense, but then that station fell on us. That finally told us who was in control of this terrible situation, goddammit!!” The gunner looked up into the night sky while holding the heavy machinegun’s grip. “Also, we heard from that guy that there was a kid who charged right into a rioting crowd to save a filthy old man who wasn’t some cute girl or rich or anything.”

“?”

“Do you not remember the man you met in the park? Well, that’s probably even better. It shows all the more how virtuous you are. Oh, right, right.”

The last thing he said was not directed at Kamijou.

The gunner turned to Fran.

“We heard your confession too. If there’s a chemical fire or biological disaster coming, we’ll charge right in, but not even we could do that.”

Her words had gotten through.

They were standing on the same stage.

It had not been intentional and there had been no plan, but this situation was a direct result of that girl working up her courage.

“The resolution we’re talking about might not be quite the same as the one you’re imagining,” warned Kamijou.

“Anything’s fine as long as it brings light back to Academy City. Look at this city. It’s completely dead and covered in darkness! We’ll accept whatever nonsense the world might throw at us if it means getting the power, gas, and water back up

and running!! That's what Useful Spider is for! Listen, we aren't going to let you spend Christmas surrounded by rubble!!"

This was all part of the 48 Hours to Restore Order. Kamijou could not approve of everything they had done to achieve that goal. He still remembered how they had mercilessly sprayed high-pressure water on rioting boys and girls to throw them from an elevated highway and how they had used giant fans to tear down the shelters that were hiding weapons.

But this was the desire at the base of it all. They wanted to bring Academy City back to normal as soon as possible. They were willing to play the thankless role to that end. They too were trying to protect Academy City.

That was why they had set aside taking revenge for the damage to their headquarters and instead prioritized suppressing the former Kamisato Faction that had caused all of this mess. They had used themselves as bait and let themselves be shot down to send a transport helicopter to Kamijou's group since they held the key to ending this.

They would not betray Kamijou.

At the very least, not until Kamisato Kakeru's return had ended the chaos.

"We need to get to the big hospital on the south end of District 7! We can end all of this if we get there!!"

That was immediately passed onto the pilot and they accelerated.

Perhaps to hide their intent, several other helicopters took off in other directions.

"Also-…"

A loud rumbling reached them.

"Are you still doing this? You haven't given up yet, Fraaan!?"

That voice seemed to shake the entire world and the hoodie bikini girl bit her lip.

"How can I give up…?"

But she spoke.

The small girl declared war once more.

"How can I give up on Kamisato-chan's future!? Even if I can never be with him

again and even if I know my feelings can never be fulfilled, I still won't give up!!"

Kamijou once more focused on the people pursuing them.

And he resumed speaking.

"Also, this city's chaos will never end if we don't lose them and silence them!!"

Part 9

The pursuers were also racking their brains in the face of this unexpected situation.

Cosplay Girl Olivia asked a question as she flew around with her jet engine.

"What do we do, Maya? It doesn't look like this is over yet!"

"Either way, we can't fulfill Tyrant's order without Kamijou Touma's head. We have to do this if we're going to save Kamisato-kun!!"

After all, he had accepted that ghost as she was. He had supported her very existence by saying she did not need to change. And that was why Goryou Maya was still here.

So she would become any evil spirit and she would transform into even a vengeful spirit.

Even after growing to the size of a high-rise building, the ghost with the heart-shaped headdress and the bewitchingly revealing burial clothes had to travel along the ground. Olivia and the others who called the sky their home could view the situation from a different perspective.

"How about we destroy that magic circle?"

"If they don't notice, they'll essentially start operating on Kamisato-kun with broken tools. If we want to rest easy, we have to kill the doctor and not just break the tools. The magic circle on the road doesn't matter. We need to keep chasing the ones who will use it!!"

But that target was a problem too.

After several transport helicopters had landed in the container yard in a nearly suicide mission, they had flown off again in different directions. It was unknown which one Kamijou Touma, Fran, and Luca were onboard. It was even possible they had split up and were riding multiple helicopters.

“What do we do!?”

“Let’s go with the only surefire solution: bring them all down!!”

Part 10

Normal helicopters only had a top speed of 300-400 kph, but that was still far faster than a 50cc cart. And helicopters could ignore the terrain and take the shortest route, so the time loss was considerably reduced.

But.

They still could not lose Cosplay Girl Olivia who had a jet engine built into her magic wand. She was continuing to fire tracer rounds that looked like red or blue fireworks, perhaps to look like magic bullets.

“Damn!! She’s still flying around up here!?”

The gunner leaned out of the side cargo door and returned fire, but the downpour of bullets could not hit the magic girl who was taking complex turns through the night sky.

Also…

“On your mark.”

Kamijou could have sworn he heard a voice saying that.

He immediately grabbed the gunner’s shoulder and pulled him back inside the helicopter.

The very next moment, someone jumped in through the open cargo door and continued on to break through the opposite door.

Kamijou thought his eardrums would burst from the explosive pressure of the

wind.

The gunner had been strapped in by a belt in place of a lifeline, but that belt had been severed.

Fran had been sitting on the floor of the helicopter and she vocalized what she had seen from there.

“C-Claire!! Did that plant glasses girl make a comeback with her fake A.A.A.!?”

That girl had indeed made a decoy version out of plants to make Kihara Yuiitsu think the A.A.A. tech was spreading. It had not functioned as an actual weapon and only flew using plant alcohol fuel, but…

“All of you girls are way too obsessed!!”

“Also, I’m pretty sure Claire had both her fists held forward as she flew,” pointed out Luca.

Kamijou looked out from the helicopter which was much more ventilated now. The glasses plant girl and the magical girl were complexly intertwining their paths as they targeted the helicopter once more. Only the other cargo door had been hit, but the helicopter would break apart if they took any more of those attacks. And this was too much for the gunner to hit with his heavy machinegun.

They would be destroyed at this rate.

“Take us lower!!” shouted Kamijou. “Get close to the walls along the road!!”

The power of inertia seemed to erase the pull of gravity. Both cargo doors were wide open and they had no lifeline. They could be thrown outside at any time, but the pilot went all out in fulfilling the reckless flight request.

Kamijou thought he heard someone click their tongue.

Perhaps to avoid running into a wall or breaking through the helicopter, the jet engine cosplay girl sharply changed course at the last second.

But Claire charged right on in.

If she had not hesitated to avoid colliding with Olivia’s altered course, that attack would likely have destroyed the helicopter. But she strayed a bit off target and broke through the thick reinforced glass of a building alongside them.

And she did not seem to care.

She actually accelerated inside the office building and blew away countless documents and LCD monitors as she flew alongside the helicopter.

“I can’t believe her! She’s adjusting her glasses in the middle of all this!!”

“A refined gardening girl is a frightening thing. What is wrong with the world when she’s overshadowing a cosplayer who lives for posing in front of the camera?”

Claire broke through another window and was released into the night sky once more. While Olivia was essentially a normal human, Claire was made of plant cells and could regenerate even after being bisected. This damage would be nothing to her.

“She’s probably relaxed because she knows she can’t die. That just means we need to send her into a wall too thick for her to break through.”

The pilot must have picked up on that because the helicopter descended even further. They entirely abandoned the advantage gained by the flying machine. They skimmed just off the ground and followed the entirely unlit streets at 400 kph.

Olivia and Claire of course pursued them with their magic wand and boosters, but they had to be much more careful now. They sometimes had to duck below pedestrian bridges or fly above elevated highways while just about grazing the surface. Claire was far outside the norm since she had broken through thick reinforced glass before, but even she would have difficulty flying after running straight into a mass of steel or concrete.

But lowering their altitude so far brought another threat back into the picture.

Something heavy and gigantic passed by directly overhead. From the cargo door, it looked like a comet measuring several dozen meters across.

But it was not.

It was…

“Maya’s…will-o’-the-wisp!?” shouted Luca.

Then the giant mass dropped down in their path. In the blink of an eye, it remade itself into a girl in white burial clothes who then made a full right-to-left swing of a tower-sized arm.

“Owaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

hh!!!???”

The unnamed pilot screamed.

The helicopter rose somewhat and slipped between the giant fingers before passing between the two legs below the revealing burial clothes.

“Looks like she’s the type that doesn’t wear underwear with Japanese clothing,” commented Fran.

“!?”

The gunner quickly looked back, but they had already passed by and it was impossible to tell if Fran was telling the truth. Having missed her target, the giant vengeful spirit let her humanoid form collapse and transformed back into a comet-like will-o’-the-wisp.

The pursuing spirit produced a spiteful voice.

“I won’t let you have him… I’ll never let you have Kamisato-kun!!”

“Who ever said he was yours?” asked Fran. “I will break Kamisato Kakeru’s curse and free him! I will show him he is not just a powerful attraction! I will show him he can leave us of his own free will and that that is exactly why all of you are staying with him of your own free will!! Doing that – just that – will surely take a burden off his heart!!”

“Why…would you do that!? There is nothing in that for you!!”

“No matter how this ends, I can no longer stay by his side!! But I can still do something for him! And I will see that desire of mine fulfilled. Maya, no matter what you might do, I won’t let you interfere with the end of my love!!!!!!”

Kamijou and the others were being helplessly tossed about, but they could not just let the situation carry them along. Kamijou had regretted doing just that with the High Priest and with Kamisato. He could not let that happen again.

“Let’s do something about this. We can’t bring these monsters with us to the District 7 hospital. That’ll just be a repeat of the container yard!”

“But what exactly do we do!?” asked Luca. “Normal bullets can’t hit Olivia or Claire and Maya has partially become a perpetual motion machine by turning her own scent into the incense that maintains her own existence. I can’t think of any way to defeat them!”

“I’ve been wondering about that,” muttered Kamijou. “Hey, Luca. You said Maya was adjusting her scent by being careful about what she eats right? And that she’s always munching on vegetable sticks or sipping at a sweet drink.”

“Only Maya knows the exact ratio, but it looked something like a combination of vegetarianism and an extreme sweet tooth.”

“Keh,” interrupted Fran. “You’re dead wrong if you think a girl’s body is made of fruit and sugar.”

The spiky-haired boy continued thinking and then leaned out of the cargo door even as the helicopter shook violently.

“What are you doing!?”

“That would mean her mouth, I guess. Okay, this might work.”

Without looking back, Kamijou focused on the powerless city.

“Somewhere…there has to be a windowless building somewhere…”

“Kihara Yuiitsu’s base? It’s true that’s somewhere in District 7, but…”

“No, not that one!!”

Kamijou shouted back, but the giant will-o’-the-wisp passed over the helicopter again. They could not ascend for fear of Claire and Olivia, so they were restricted to the roads. That made them easy to pursue for those who could fly freely.

He observed the area up ahead where Maya landed and become a girl in burial clothes and a heart-shaped headdress. He read the large writing on a building wall.

“H552M. That’s got to be it!!”

When Kamijou reached for the heavy machinegun sticking out of the cargo door, the professional gunner quickly grabbed him.

“Tell me how to shoot!!”

“Maya isn’t reliant on her Censer drones right now,” warned Luca. “She can’t be defeated by physical attacks!!”

“That doesn’t matter! Listen, I’m going to start firing with this!!”

It was a lot like a three-legged race. Without a lifeline, Kamijou could be thrown outside if the helicopter tilted and he worked with the gunner to forcibly aim at the flat wall of a building up ahead.

Each shot was a huge bullet the same size as from an anti-materiel rifle. It was a poorly aimed stream of bullets, but each one opened a fist sized hole in the wall, cracks spread from those, those cracks connected, and the entire wall peeled away. It may have been similar to piercing a window with an icepick to create a triangular hole.

But none of it actually hit Maya's giant form.

"Don't think your tricks can stop our feelings for Kamisato-kun!!" roared the ghost girl.

"!!"

Fran manipulated the screen of the card-sized terminal she pulled from her backpack. Her UFO balloon had been floating around somewhere, but now she sent it toward the ghost girl. Pirate Girl Luca's spare bombs had been attached to it, but even that failed. Maya swung her arm and they only blew away the wall of a nearby building.

The ghost girl with long black hair and white burial clothes was entirely unfazed. To target the helicopter down by the ground, she swung her foot back like she was about to kick a soccer ball. She built up enough strength to break a landmark broadcast tower.

"What do we do!?" shouted the gunner.

"It's already over."

The immediate reply was the one everyone had wanted but that no one had expected. Fran and Luca gasped right along with the gunner.

"Maya was careful about what she ate to maintain just the right scent. I don't know what the exact ratio was, but messing it up is easy. When I was talking with the chemistry club, they said there are basic smells just like there are primary colors. Use them and you can overpower other, more sensitive smells."

Henning's theory had 6: Spicy, Flowery, Resinous, Fruity, Foul, and Burnt.

Amoore's theory had 7: Camphoraceous, Musky, Floral, Peppermint, Ethereal (as a chemical), Pungent, and Putrid.

Unlike sight or taste, the classification was not complete, but that showed just how complex a sense it was. For example, some neurophysiologists who researched smell rejected the very idea of basic smells and – with two exceptions – it was not known why humans detected those scents at all.

“That helped when we had no water during the heat wave. It was a luxury though, so when we didn’t have any, we had to search out used coffee filters and teabags.”

This was Kamijou Touma’s goal.

“I targeted a windowless agricultural building where crops are grown. And with an H for herbs and an M for mint!! The entire building is full of mint. Even if it’s all shriveled up with the power out, blowing holes in the wall should release a dense aroma. And once you breathe that in through your mouth or nose, you’ll lose that incense created from the optimal balance!!”

It was unclear if ghosts really existed, but Maya did at least. By inducing psychological instability with low-frequency waves and smells undetectable by human senses, she created an environment where she could be seen and thus exist. It was a lot like passing colorless light through a prism, so she could create the color or form that she wanted. And that had transformed the slender and ethereal girl into a nearly undefeatable force.

“What…?”

But what happened when that fell apart? What if someone took a hammer to the prism that split the light? Not even she would know how the light would scatter.

Goryou Maya’s beautiful face swelled out unnaturally.

The building-sized vengeful spirit could no longer maintain her own form. Her outlines collapsed one after another, like her own bones were consuming her flesh.

“Kaaami…sssa…”

If she had come to a stop and calmed down, she might have been able to regain her form.

But.

Even if she had died and lost her physical body, she was still a girl in love.

“I will…do anything…for him!!!!”

There was no way she would stop. She stayed true to herself to the end.

Even as she crumbled away, she tried to kick at the road like there was a soccer ball there. She did not give in. She would not hand Kamisato Kakeru's fate to anyone she did not approve of. None of them was a villain, but they had all chosen the wrong method.

Kamijou leaned out of the helicopter and clenched his right fist without thinking.

He considered jumping out at her if she continued pursuing them.

But she could not keep it up. By attacking as she fell apart, she ended up detaching her own foot. The giant leg flew in a parabolic arc like someone throwing their shoe after picking up speed on a swing.

The helicopter just barely managed to avoid it and then slipped below the girl in burial clothes by flying right up next to the destroyed agricultural building.

But those behind them were not so lucky.

"Ah!?"

First, twintailed Sawai Olivia flew in on her jet engine magic wand. She tried to take a sharp turn away from the giant leg, but it grazed her shoulder and sent her into a tailspin.

Next, Tazuma Claire tried to fly below Maya, but she was caught in the collapse and crushed.

Kamijou's group no longer had to fear pursuit.

The other girls might continue pursuing them on the ground, but the helicopter could outrun them by ascending and flying at full speed.

Kamijou Touma recalled where he had seen Patricia looking out of the hospital's window.

"The 13th window from the right on the 8th floor!! We don't have time to land. Fran, Luca, you two jump right iiii

“…?”

Things were noisy outside.

A small blonde girl sat up in bend and looked out the window.

And then it happened.

An elevated window could be heard shattering.

The transport helicopter was piloted with miraculous skill. It flew right up to the hospital window and turned to the side like a stunt car drifting into a parallel parking spot. The cargo door had already been blown off and the girls were not strapped in, so that was a decisive action for them.

The powerful inertia swung them around and tossed them out before they could even steel their resolve.

They broke through the window and rolled into the hospital room.

“Dh!”

Pirate Girl Luca groaned and got up, but she did not find what she expected.

“What’s this? He sounded so confident, but there’s no one here. Did he get the room wrong?”

“No, that may have been intentional.”

Fran also stood up and tapped on the wall with a loose fist. She seemed to be confirming the presence of a patient in the neighboring room.

After seeing Sample Shoggoth and the red fur of Cannibalization, it may have been impossible for that girl to look away from the truth of the world. After receiving the flesh and blood of Magic God Nephthys, it may have been impossible for her to be removed from the mystical.

But there was no reason to actively pull her into it.

That may have been the thought behind it.

“It’s just one thin wall.”

“That’s right. We can fit her inside the ceremonial ground from here.”

The two girls faced each other.

They were swapping the A.A.A. out for the remnants of Nephthys. The different symbols would require redoing some of the details, but they already had the overall framework worked out. They did not need any encouragement. They knew they could do it.

They breathed in and then out.

“Thank you for sticking with me this far, Luca.”

Then Karasuma Fran smiled and gave an announcement to the girl who had been her comrade in arms and her rival.

“*Now, let’s bring an end to my love.*”

Part 12

When she received the report below the Windowless Building, Kihara Yuiitsu's fate was also sealed.

"…"

"…"

"…"

The atmosphere had entirely changed. The girls she had positioned as her personal guards were no longer obligated to obey her orders. Plus, this was the group she had selected to protect her. Their combat ability was immeasurable. So once their positions changed, everything took a 180 degree turn and she was thrown into an utterly hopeless situation.

It was like a clownfish being mistakenly eaten by its symbiotic anemone.

The many blades, gazes, and pressures that had defended her now turned to face Kihara Yuiitsu from all directions.

"I see, I see, I see."

Lab Coat and Bikini Yuiitsu did not sound particularly interested.

One-armed Mass Murderer Salome slowly stood up in front of her. No, it was not just her. The other girls with equally strange powers and abilities also approached.

While inside the predator's maw, the greatest evil looked like she was seeing the end of an experiment.

"This would be game over then."

Between the Lines 4

Someone spoke from somewhere.

"Oh? You're leaving already? Well, don't worry about us."

"This battle will probably never end, but that should be a lot of fun."

And someone else replied.

“Yeah, everyone’s calling for me.”

Epilogue: Or Doubt Contains the Truth – Bet_Time.Red_or_Black.

This was what happened at dawn.

“This is Useful Spider. We are pleased to report that the 48 Hours to Restore Order has been completed. Our Academy City has returned. Please rest easy as you return to your studies.”

Kamijou Touma heard the voice amplified by a loudspeaker.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow! Don’t bite me, you idiot! Don’t bite me, Index!”

“First you vanish like you know exactly what you’re doing and then you call us out to the station only to never show up. Touma, I think you need to rethink your life in several different ways…”

“What is this quiet anger? Have I really crossed some kind of line this time!?”

“And don’t forget that you stood me up as well, human.”

“Gnyaaahhh!? I don’t need a god picking up that biting habit! You’re gonna tear my earlobe right off!!”

Once everything appeared to be over, Kamijou hobbled back to the shelter school and found a number of tragedies wrought by his own failure to explain anything.

Fukiyose crossed her arms (in a way that lifted up her large breasts) and sounded utterly exasperated.

“You reap what you sow…”

“Can you explain to me what exactly he sowed to warrant reaping this!? With the way everyone’s carrying on around him, Kami-yan must’ve been on one hell of an unstoppable rampage!!”

Akikawa Mie, who was struggling in a school swimsuit, and the Jumpy Bunny also sighed.

“Anyway, now I can leave…”

“You did a good job through all of this, Mie-chan!”

“Yeah, right. I’m leaving this important position to you, Onee-chan. I’m getting home and going to sleep.”

When the people in the student council room left the school, the rest of the students in the shelter saw it as their cue. They hesitantly started walking out past the fence.

They ran into students from another school on the way home.

It was the high class girls of Tokiwadai Middle School who had apparently just left the frog-faced doctor’s hospital.

When he spotted a familiar face, Kamijou raised a hand in greeting with a pair of jaws still firmly latched onto his head.

“Hi…”

“Nn.”

It was Misaka Mikoto.

She gave a puzzled look to the girl clinging to the spiky-haired boy’s back and to the fairy(?) on his shoulder, but then she caught up to him.

“Are you headed back to your dorm too?”

“I’m really worried about the contents of the fridge and the rice cooker. Although I guess anything’s better than opening the door to find a stray Element saying hi…” Kamijou slowly sighed. “More importantly, are you okay? I don’t know what that curse business was about, but you’re still recovering, right? If it’s like a cold, you should probably get somewhere warm and get some rest.”

“Eh? Wait, not so close!”

“Hmm, you don’t seem to have a fever… But touching you with my right hand isn’t really doing anything. Maybe all you can do at this stage is rest to recover your strength.”

“I-I-I said not so close!!!!!!”

Squeezing her eyes shut and shoving him away with both hands was all well and

good, but the electricity surging form her palms was more of an issue. Kamijou was not the only one blown away. In case you had forgotten, he had a fairy on his shoulder and a nun clinging to his back.

And when she saw the three of them lying in pile, the look in Mikoto's eyes cooled.

"…No matter what happens, everything continues like normal for you, doesn't it?"

"Ugh, cough. I'm prepared to chalk your emotional instability up to a teenage rebellious phase, but how about you tell me what the root cause of it is…?"

Kamijou's voice was quiet and unstable as he lay on the road, but Mikoto did not seem too bothered as she struck a daunting pose next to him.

"I don't have to worry about it personally since my dorm is outside, but the girls in the dorm inside the School Garden aren't going to have it easy. And with what happened to the school building, the recovery work is going to take a lot of manual labor."

Kamijou recalled the tragic state of Tokiwadai Middle School and that brought something else to mind.

The A.A.A.

And the mysterious nosebleeds that were likely related to that somehow.

"Hey, Misaka…"

"I think I'll have to use that thing a while longer. And instead of military weapons, I can put together some construction attachments…"

Kamisato Kakeru heard the voice amplified by a loudspeaker.

As lights started coming on in the early morning city, a great cheer shook the air like during an international sports competition. He could feel the vibration in his skin and in the ground and not just his ears, and he let out a deep breath.

He sensed some other breaths as well.

"That is the end of that," said Ellen. "I had no idea what was going to happen when you vanished before our eyes."

“I feel like I understand you a little bit better now, Kamisato-san,” said Claire. “Maybe we should give you a collar or give you a GPS ankle bracelet.”

“Stop it, Claire,” said Elza. “It’s because we don’t give him enough space that the boss wanders off like that.”

The girls were speaking cheerfully to him now, but things had been much worse when he had first “returned”. In all seriousness, they had nearly killed him. He could accept Machina, the young wife and kitchen drunk in a swimsuit and apron, who had been so overwhelmed with emotion she had smacked him with a frying pan. It was to be expected that Elza, the girl with roughly cut fox ear hair, had hit him with her bottle of 10 yen coins. But he had been truly prepared to die when Plant Girl Claire had wrapped his entire body in vines, Mass Murderer Salome had wordlessly chewed through a utility knife blade to gather power, and Trucker Deborah had turned the corner of the intersection in a gigantic semi-trailer truck pulling a 20-ton container. For an instant, he had suspected that the cruel Magic Gods had created a happy-looking hell that only appeared to be a safe return.

In his usual habit, Kamisato tried to crack his neck with his hand, but then he recalled he had no hand.

“What do I do about this? Maybe I should get a prosthetic.”

“Wait, boss! I won’t let you take a step into Salome’s world!”

“That’s right. If you’re gonna do it, at least make it something cooler.”

“Like a drill!!”

“Or a pile bunker!!”

The girls all cheerfully gave their opinions, but his cyborg sister did not actually step forward. She wore the incredibly aggressive outfit of a naked raincoat, but she now had a cooler hanging from her shoulder by a strap.

It could only contain one thing.

“What do we do about this?”

“Sew it onto me now and I’ll probably be blown away again. But I can’t exactly let someone else have it either. I guess we’ll just preserve it while searching for a way to erase its power.”

He was implicitly saying he had grown beyond his undivided focus on taking revenge against the Magic Gods.

“By the way…”

“What is it, goddamn stupid Onii-chan?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

Kamisato looked to the cooler once more.

Taking it back was fine and he should celebrate the fact that they had settled this before someone like Kihara Yuiitsu could use it maliciously.

But how had they taken it back?

What had happened to that usurper?

The girls’ smiles did not give him an answer.

“I’m surprised Maya could recover from that muddy mess she’d turned into.”

“If anything, she’s looking better than ever after remaking her Censers from Academy City parts. The real surprise was getting Mary back.”

“Yeah, she can be stubborn, so catching her wasn’t easy. She’s supposedly inherited the noble spirit of the Japanese wolf, but we really need to put a collar on her or something. We never would’ve found her if she hadn’t reacted to those Useful Spider people’s siren by howling on the rooftop.”

“Has anyone seen Fran?”

“No, but I’ve heard the cosplay girl hurt her shoulder in a minor collision.”

“She said she was about ready to move on from Kanamin, so she might actually be happy about that. I mean, aren’t sickly girls the big thing right now? She’s so dedicated to realism that if the character’s arm is in a sling, she’d probably smash her own bones with a hammer.”

“And Ellen, you’re pretty sturdy yourself.”

…

…

…

Kihara Yuiitsu had once said the following:

"I must become a unique Kihara that surpasses my teacher. But what kind of accomplishment would prove I had done that? I gave it a lot of thought."

She had never been focused on the 100 girls.

She had been fighting against something else.

"And I think the most obvious answer is to monopolize through numbers. Kiharas like us will no longer be special. Every last one of the 6 or 7 billion will be Kiharas. If I accomplish that, even Aleister will be at a loss as he tries to manage us with his Archetype Controller. After all, he manages us by twisting the definitions to crush the minority, but that won't work once all of mankind is a Kihara. And the Kihara growing in everyone's hearts will not be unique, so no single method will be able to defeat them all."

In that case, this was not a victory or a defeat.

Or perhaps the fear that had bound those girls via that special right hand had released into the world a type of Kihara that not even Yuiitsu had seen before.

Or perhaps *she had drawn out the cruelty that had already existed within them through some other method.*

Now for one other story.

This occurred before Kamijou Touma and Kamisato Kakeru parted ways.

"The people following me weren't being manipulated by my right hand's power. I'm embarrassed to admit it, but they're with me for some other reason. I'm not about to deny that anymore."

Kamisato had given a pale smile, but that had not been all he had to say.

He had continued.

"But it still seems weird to me that Claire is a lot like a plant, that Luca can use the magic of Legba Atibon who is connected to Voodoo and pirates, and so on. Something has twisted them. And I think my right hand was a part of that."

"…"

"So a similar distortion might exist around you," Kamisato had stated. "But at the same time, the things around you should still be explainable with what you

consider normal. So unlike with me, it isn't a distortion that infects the people around you."

A distortion.

The root of the power that had created the Kamisato Faction.

"In that case, where is that distortion?"

There was "something" that rivalled the strange powers and abilities of those girls.

"That distortion exists; you just can't see it. It might behoove you to give that some serious thought."

Kamijou Touma and Kamisato Kakeru's paths parted.

Then what about the girl who did not follow either of them? What path did she wander onto?

Karasuma Fran walked all alone through the city that was regaining signs of life.

She had fought with all her might to bring back Kamisato Kakeru.

But as a result, she could never walk with him again.

She had chosen this path.

She had deceived everyone by claiming to be a science-based UFO freak whose Gemstone powers were amplified by the chip she had implanted in her neck. But she was actually a magician from the Anglican Church. No matter what her feelings, she could not escape the sin she had committed. She had also said she would take responsibility for what had happened to Academy City once the recovery was complete.

Happiness was nowhere to be found.

But she was not seeking it.

So…

"Yes, this should make a good location for a conclusion."

Someone stood before the girl who had nowhere to go.

That "human" looked like both a man and a woman, like both an adult and a child, and like both a saint and a sinner. He stared at the traitor with an expression that could not be explained by any of the known emotions.

"Were you hoping for this from the beginning?" she asked.

"If so, I would have been a tad cleverer about it."

Anyone who had done even surface level historical research would know that the man named Aleister Crowley had never succeeded in anything. From a very young age, he had lived a life of one setback after another. Once he resigned himself to the fact that he could not grasp the truth through the proper methods, he had dabbled in the hidden methods of magic and ultimately become one of the sparks that set off a great internal conflict within the world's largest magic cabal.

His innocent daughter had collapsed and his beloved wife had broken.

The monastery that supposedly shared their wisdom with all people had made a mistake when treating the sick and it had all fallen apart.

Thanks to this, he knew from the beginning that nothing in his life would work out as he wanted. He knew that, but he put everything together so that it would ultimately converge on a single path no matter what crises befell him. That was the series of flowcharts he referred to as his "plan". Anyone unfamiliar with the facts behind it would likely see it as a nightmarish destiny that could never be corrected.

But those who had been blessed from the beginning and were fulfilled enough to never question the status quo would never seek out magic in the first place.

The Magic Names they carved into their hearts were like scabs or scars that filled in what that person was missing.

"Kamisato Kakeru or Misaka Mikoto. From that decision, I saw another abbreviated line. While I pursued those two on the surface, I used that line to pursue another target that did not show itself on the surface. That line connected directly back to Lola Stuart, it hid the presence of World Rejecter while secretly guiding it here, and it even caused great damage to Academy City, including Kihara Yuiitsu's rampage. …My intent was to draw out you."

"…"

"There is no need to be so worried. *This was an entirely unplanned prize.* I am not

about to say this is all following some absolute plan I set up 1000 years ago. The world of man has a nasty habit of tripping me up from both the good and evil side of things, but as long as I can turn all of that in the correct direction, I can accomplish my great desire. Just as both the Sephiroth and the Qliphoth can provide man with hidden knowledge when used correctly."

"What do you plan to do with me?"

"I will provide you with a result worthy of what you paid. The most painful part of this entire series of events was not the Elements filling the city or the microwave heat wave destroying most of the electronics. …It was the fact that I had to descend from my vertical ship and step out into the public eye. That was a high price, but it means a lot that I have in turn acquired a spy with a direct connection to the Anglican Church's Archbishop. No matter how much pressure I put on Necessarius through the official channels, I never receive a response, but things should be different with you."

Karasuma Fran recalled the time that had passed and the people that had been there.

She wondered if the quake starting from her would reach them.

"And…if I refuse?"

"I was never expecting you to agree. Even if you have been set up with a trick that prevents you from divulging your secrets, that security system will no longer function if I separate your memories from your personality. I dirtied my hands quite a bit during the conflict within that cabal. After all, one's stock of knowledge was directly linked to their power back then."

So would he cut open her skull and directly attach electrodes?

Or would he slice her brain itself into blocks and throw out the portions related to life support and personality?

"Heh."

"What is so funny?"

"Oh, just that it's a fitting end for a UFO girl to be abducted and mutilated."

Any camouflage would have worked as long as it disguised that she was a magician, so why had she continued to seek a new friend in the stars of the night sky?

(Yes…)

She had been trapped between science and magic. She had been tired of turning a false smile toward someone she cared for and the girls around him. She had been sick of this small planet where she could not escape its influence. It may have been a pure form of the juvenile desire to be taken away to somewhere far, far away.

It may have been that desire that led her to work alongside another boy altogether while still thinking about Kamisato Kakeru. She may have been seeking someone who existed outside the rules she was familiar with but that still spoke a common language with her.

(In other words, did I just want someone I could open up to?)

Someone she could speak to about the worries she could not tell anyone else about.

Someone who would still accept her afterwards.

Someone who would help her think of a way to make up with the others and let her get into a fight if it did not work.

But there was no one like that here.

No one came to save her.

The story of Karasuma Fran had ended with saving Kamisato Kakeru and the rest was unnecessary. So no one would hear the screams of someone whose story was already over.

She resigned herself to that fact.

Or she thought she did.

However…

The situation entirely ignored her intentions and underwent a great change. That change was brought about by dry gunshots.

The hoodie bikini girl was not the only one to widen their eyes with surprise.

The “human” had seemed like an intangible shimmering of the heat, but he doubled over like normal when the bullets flew in from the side. There were holes in his green surgical gown and a great quantity of fresh blood flowed out a

moment later. This was a perfectly natural result, but Fran could not believe it. She might have accepted it more readily if the blood had been green.

“Oh.”

The “human” tried to call for something, but dark red blood spilled from his mouth.

Fran too turned toward the source of the noise.

There she saw a boy of high school age with short blond hair who wore a school uniform and thin blue sunglasses. He readily wielded a handgun, but his words were far from logical or efficient.

“Did you expect this too? Or is it part of what your plan can correct for even if you didn’t expect it? Answer me, Aleister! In your own words!!”

“…I see.”

Those two had been connected in a position unseen to Fran.

“That virtual reality theory…”

“I manipulated the crowds using the Spheres and it was all to orchestrate this moment. It was all so I could make progress from the shadows.” Tsuchimikado’s voice was horrifyingly cold. “We had an agreement that you would save my little sister Maika. But you didn’t do a damn thing when the Elements attacked or the heat wave struck. It’s time to end this, Aleister. Your time is over. Be swallowed up by ordinary familial love and die.”

The “human” held his mouth as fresh blood spilled out and he held his empty palm out toward the sunglasses boy.

But then the “human” stopped moving.

“The Archetype Controller. The nightmarish culmination of your work that allows you to divide people between good and evil, like and dislike. But it’s too bad. I was always a double spy that belongs to both the magic side and the science side. You can turn me towards one side to rob me of the other, but that first side will kill you. So which identity do you want to be killed by, the magician or the esper?”

More gunshots rang out.

The “human” in a surgical gown collapsed on the spot, but it was the blond sunglasses boy who clicked his tongue.

“Karasuma Fran. You are Kamisato Kakeru’s controller. I don’t know if you’re still connected, though.”

“Who are…you?”

“Tsuchimikado Motoharu.” He answered quickly as if he were in a rush. “I was an Anglican spy sent to Academy City, but I sold Anglican information to Academy City. You could say *I’m the Kamijou Touma version of Karasuma Fran.*”

“…”

“Just like you failed, I failed too. Aleister promised to keep my step-sister safe, but he didn’t actually do anything. As I said, it’s time to end this and retreat. But Maika knows nothing of the world’s truth. If I have that normal little sister run through the back alleys with me, she’ll collapse. And if I’m after the support of an organization, which organization should that be? But then you showed up.”

“Are you going to get the Anglican Church’s help?”

“They’re not exactly great either, but it’s better than staying in Academy City. Either way, I was fortunate to contact someone with a direct link to Lola. You’re the lifeline for my sister and me, so I’ll deal with the problems surrounding you. It doesn’t sound very pretty, but it’s something like a murder exchange. I’ll save you, so you save me. We can both play to our strengths, so I look forward to working with you.”

Fran was unsure whether or not she should take his proffered hand.

And he did not wait for her to decide.

“Anyway, we need to get away from here. Staying here would be a bad idea.”

“B-because Anti-Skill has recovered enough to show up after those gunshots?”

“Don’t be silly.”

More gunshots followed.

He clearly aimed for the head of the collapsed “human” and several dark red holes really did appear in it.

Nevertheless…

“This monster won’t die so easily. We’ll be the ones in trouble.”

The rabbit-ear antennae girl felt a definite chill in her spine.

She did not know what Tsuchimikado was talking about, but her fear and confusion was not directed at him.

It was at the supposedly lifeless and unmoving corpse.

However, she sensed some kind of invisible miasma escaping the entire body.

It was murderous intent.

It did not matter where the bullet holes were located. He could reboot himself at any time and spread much more obvious disaster. Fran could tell with such certainty that it felt downright prophetic.

The die had been cast.

The world was filled with incomprehensible logic. It was like speaking with an alien. But when she was faced with something she could not explain with her own rules, it was hope that grew in Fran's heart. This was not a situation she could overcome with her own deck of cards, so that meant the only escape route required using the world's black box.

She had to grab at the alien's hand.

She had to board their ship.

"My name is Karasuma Fran."

"And mine is Tsuchimikado Motoharu."

She left the scene with the boy who stuck the handgun in his belt.

“But what exactly do we do? I can use my communication equipment to contact the Anglican Church waiting in the background, but they aren’t enough to send reinforcements into Academy City right away. We can’t rely on the strength of an organization.”

“He’s gathered a bunch of adolescent boys and girls in one place, he’s spreading unique teachings, and he’s even injecting them with drugs to achieve further knowledge. To Aleister, Academy City is the return of Thelema. An individual can’t overcome that kingdom with a direct attack.”

“Then what do we do?”

“If you challenge the police to a car chase, you normally can’t shake the cop cars and choppers. But things change if you drive right into an art museum. They’ll be too afraid of damaging their surroundings to pursue.” This person calling himself Tsuchimikado readily answered. “Basically, we go to the last thing Aleister wants destroyed and use it as a shield. It’s such an extreme singularity that he doesn’t know when he could get his hands on it again. And it’s at the very foundation of Aleister’s precious plan.”

“What is it?”

“You’ve already seen it.”

After slowly exhaling, the professional among professionals answered.

“Kamijou Touma. When you’re in trouble, it’s always a good idea to ask a classmate for help, nyah☆”

He was clueless.

He thought it was all over.

The spiky-haired boy honestly believed he could sleep like a log all day long since school would certainly be called off for the day.

But he had forgotten something important.

Kamijou Touma was always hopelessly plagued by misfortune.

“Ahh, we’re finally back home.”

“Welcome back… I’m already exhausted…”

There was a bright smile on his face.

But only because he had no idea what fate had in store for him 5 seconds later.

Bonus: Using Final Bosses to Determine a Sociological Threat

Academy City's administrative agencies were concentrated in solemn District 1. Normal students rarely visited that district, but since Uiharu Kazari had said she was headed there to study, Shirai Kuroko decided to tag along. But once they entered the Board of Directors Library which contained all books and magazines in Academy City, Uiharu reached for something truly unexpected.

"A-a gaming magazine!?"

"This is a library, Shirai-san, so be quiet."

Kuroko was unsure what was so enjoyable about it, but Uiharu piled up back issues of the same magazine on the desk in a reading booth.

"The editorial department's official site is the fastest way to get the latest information, but they focus so much on speed that the articles are often rushed and sloppy. Paper media takes time to publish and sell, so the data tends to be more organized."

"…Honestly, I was wondering what you were so focused on, but it's only video games?"

"You can't take video games lightly."

Uiharu selected a random gaming magazine and flipped through it.

"Shirai-san, have you ever heard of final boss sociology? Well, I'll admit it's mostly just online slang."

"?"

"It refers to how video games, especially RPGs, tend to use everyone's subconscious view of a villain for their final boss. Or maybe it would be better to say that many games are released, but the ones that best match society will be more highly praised."

Uiharu pointed to an article from 2 or 3 years before.

“Take this for example. It looks like a fantasy game, but the villain is wealthy and controls the distribution of goods using ships and trains. That would be pointing to online shopping.”

“Well, now that you mention it…”

“And 2 weeks after the game was released, a report was published that a major global online store was applying pressure to local shops and further isolating different regions. This is a news article from that time. They had that pegged perfectly, didn’t they?”

“Wasn’t it just a coincidence? It would have been difficult to acquire that data in advance and include it in their scenario.”

“Of course. Developing a game takes 2 or 3 years after the project is greenlit. But the makers have to determine what the players as a whole want and predict how that will change before the release date. It’s a lot like trying to read the wind. In that case, they may have been unwittingly picking up on a vague anxiety and giving it physical form in their scenario.”

“Hmm.”

“By pursuing the changes to final bosses, you can see the changes in the social evils people pursue. In that case, it seems to me you might be able to get ahead of future history by pursuing those fictional final bosses. I mean, I said developing a video game takes 2 or 3 years, right?”

The creators sharply picked up on the interests and anxieties of the masses and Uiharu gathered and analyzed the stimuli that those creators gave physical form.

“In other words, analyzing the officially announced projects allows you to predict major incidents 3 years in advance?”

“It’s still only a theory, though. Only by collectively analyzing dozens or hundreds of project articles each month can you finally start to grasp the trends. If I can create an algorithm to automatically select and analyze the new information online, I bet I could do some interesting things.”

Uiharu spread out several back issues on the table.

“This is the part I can’t quite figure out. There are a few unsteady trends, but they don’t combine into a single whole. It’s a weird feeling, like a double helix wrapping around itself to create a single path. If I can’t figure this out, I’m not sure I can get any real results.”

“I’m not sure I understand, so can you dumb it down for me?”

“Oh, sorry. Basically, I’m saying there are 2 candidates for the final boss. And they’re both interfering with each other.”

“Well, is that really so surprising? The word villain can refer to anything from an individual convenience store robber to a conglomerate of corporations.”

“Maybe so.” Uiharu tilted her head. “Hmm. But it resolves so clearly into these two extremes. On the one hand, a great witch in a magical kingdom. On the other, an immortal hooked up to a machine. Surely this doesn’t mean people like that are waging a secret war behind the scenes of the real world.”

Afterword

If you've been buying one volume at a time, welcome back. If you bought them all at once, welcome.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

With this, New Testament has reached 17 volumes too. And this marks the end of the story revolving around Kamisato Kakeru. The owner of the right hand becomes the ruler of the girls. The theme here was Kamijou and Fran's escape through chaotic Academy City in order to break that curse.

Unlike Volume 16, I changed my focus when putting together the battles. Instead of letting the situation carry him along, I put in a lot more scenes of Kamijou clenching his fist and charging right in. I tasked myself with seeing how many people he could save that he did not really need to save. And you could even say that Kamisato Kakeru and the 100 girls fall into that category. I like them both, but which one tugged at your heartstrings?"

Fran was a character that grew from me wondering what we called UFOs before that word existed and how we handled them. The rabbit-ear antennae were an idea from Haimura-san, but I thought it really worked with her cover story if her design included an element of the moon rabbit.

When people saw a strange light in the night sky, they would fear some important event was occurring, or they would try to use it by gaining special knowledge that supposedly poured down from the distant planet (or the moon and the sun as well when using the magic side's terminology). When you look at all that, using horoscope results to create protective charms isn't all that different from creating a special device to communicate with UFOs.

Including her, a few girls in the Kamisato Faction had their family names revealed this volume. Maybe that will change your impression of them?

I'm betting some of you think there are too many girls in the Kamisato Faction so you can't remember all their names, but Kamijou Touma's acquaintances have grown several times that size. That too was part of the experiment this time.

Useful Spider was the exact opposite in that they were an important part of the story and yet almost nothing was given about their names or what they looked like. They acted as a contrast to the Kamisato Faction. I think by making the individuals fade away in a group, they gain a different sort of presence. They are the faceless people who think normal things like normal and do not hesitate to take action. That might be a lot like what Kamisato Kakeru would have been if he had never gained a special power in his right hand.

As for the occult, I used the sense of mystery from the UFOs while also getting back to the basics with the magic, such as with Crowley's hexagram. With Ghost Girl Maya, ghosts manifesting through incense is an idea everyone has probably heard of, but I added in the modern scientific(?) explanation of low-frequency waves that has followed after the plasma and electromagnetic wave theories. I think the charm of this series is in how those things can mix together.

I wrote this story as one to break free of a lot of things. For example, Kamijou spat out everything about his frustrations about what happened with the High Priest and Kamisato. In addition to Kamijou, I also followed that theme with Fran's answer to Kamisato. I think her and her surroundings may have broken through some things concerning the strange and abnormal-looking Kamisato Faction, creating more of an affinity there. Really, I just hope you found her cute.

But in the end, they are still the Kamisato Faction. I didn't reveal the answer even at the very end, but I hope you will all debate whether "she" survived or was killed.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Haimura-san and my editors Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anan-san. There was a huge variation in characters this time! This had to have been even more of a pain than the Amakusas. Thank you so much for sticking with me to the end.

And I give my thanks to the readers. Putting in so many heroines actually creates a large burden. The connection between Kamijou Touma and Kamisato Kakeru was even more experimental than usual, so it may not have gone down smoothly. Still, as long as you enjoyed seeing a surprising side of Kamijou Touma and his friends, I couldn't ask for anything more.

It is time to close the pages for now while praying that the pages of the next book will be opened.

And I lay my pen down for now.

I’m still trying to figure out how to delve into the new territory of a brokenhearted girl.

-Kamachi Kazuma

Toaru Majutsu no Index: New Testament — Volume 17

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